スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑱

跡継騒動 森林レンジャー

神坂 一

Yes I censored the cover. Deal with it.

Slayers Special Volume 18

Inheritance Feud - Forest Rangers!

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Inheritance Feud - Forest Rangers! [Part 1]

The murmuring of the brook. The whisper of the wind passing through the treetops. Even though it was summer in the mountain recesses, it felt surprisingly cool the moment I stepped into the shade. In a mountain stream a short distance from the highway, I let my fishing line dangle over the water's surface, intending to make a meal of whatever I caught. When traveling alone at my own leisure, I loved being able to do things like this.

Twitch! The small twig I was using as a float bobbed on the surface. "Alright, a hit!" I muttered. Timing it perfectly, I maneuvered the fishing rod I had fashioned from a tree branch and pulled up a large landlocked salmon. "Nice, that makes twelve. That should be plenty for a light lunch."

I removed the fish from the hook, turned back toward the spot where I had been tossing my catch, and froze.

There, she was.

I had no idea when she had arrived. A strange woman was standing there, nonchalantly scarfing down my fish. Raw, I might add.

"....."

Our eyes met in the empty air. For a moment, time itself seemed to freeze. Looking at her, she seemed a bit older than me. She had red hair and a face that suggested a strong will. A hunter, perhaps? She wore leather armor over clothes that looked easy to move in. A bow and arrows lay on the ground beside her, and she was using a knife in her hand to field-dress and eat the fish. She did it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"...Uh..." "It's fine," she said, cutting me off just as I opened my mouth. She nodded with a look of utter confidence. "They're fresh, so raw is okay."

"What part of this is okay!?" I roared.

Bam!

My corkscrew kick sent her sprawling onto the riverbank before she could even let out a scream. She convulsed for a moment, then suddenly bolted upright. "What do you think you're doing all of a sudden!? You have absolutely no common sense!" "That's my line!" I snapped back instantly. "What kind of nerve do you have, eating someone else's fish without permission and then acting like that!? If you're a thief, act like one! Tremble and beg for your life, or just float silently face-down in the river!"

"What kind of image do you have of a thief? No, fundamentally, I am not a thief! Don't go saying such scandalous things!" "You're a thief in every sense of the word! You ate my fish! Just now! In reality!" "Oh, my. How narrow-minded. Look! Behold this wide world!" Spouting some grand-sounding words, she spread her arms wide and looked around at the sky, the forest, and the world at large. "The fruit that grows in the forest. The fish that swim in the river. They belong to no one; they are the blessings of nature given to all people!" "That doesn't mean you have the right to eat the fish *I* caught!" "...Tch! She noticed...!"

Is she a career criminal or what? I let out a deep sigh. "...Fine. Anyway, I'll forgive you once I've sent you flying to your heart's content with an attack spell."

"Wa... Wait! Does that mean you really are a traveling mage or something?" "Take a look at what I'm wearing. It should be obvious." Saying that, I lifted the edge of my cloak. Only a mage would wear something like this in the middle of summer. From the outside, it looked hot, but if you wrapped yourself in it and cast a minor cooling spell inside, it was actually quite pleasant.

"Then, not that it's strictly in exchange for the fish, but I'll commission a job from you. That should be fine, right?" "Ahahaha... I absolutely hate it when people talk to me in that condescending tone. Therefore, your destruction is confirmed." "Wait, wait, wait! I'm telling you, the reward is huge! How about the location of an orichalcum vein as a success fee!?" "O...!?"

At the mention of such an unbelievable condition, I reflexively cut off the incantation for the Dragon Slave I had been about to chant. An orichalcum vein? That was a seriously big offer out of nowhere. For the record, orichalcum is a rare metal worth several times the price of gold. If it were a vein of the stuff, there was no telling how much it would be worth.

"—I hope this isn't— some punchline like, 'It was actually a vein that was mined out

long ago,' is it?" "Of course not. My father is a forest ranger a little ways away, so I know these mountains well. That's how I found it." "A ranger... huh..." A ranger's job was to manage the forests and mountains owned by kings or lords and to crack down on poachers. Come to think of it, she certainly had the right equipment for it. "...Well, for now... Let's at least hear the story while we eat some fish." She nodded silently at my words.

The savory aroma of roasting fish wafted through the forest breeze. The fish I had caught were making a delicious-looking sizzling sound atop rocks heated by my spells. Since it would be a waste to leave them alone, I started the conversation while they grilled.

"My name is Camilla. Camilla Crescendo," she introduced herself, glancing sideways at the fish. "I'm Lina. Lina Inverse." "There's a lord named Alantise nearby. My father is in his employ, doing ranger work. But he's getting up there in years, and it seems running around the mountains and forests is finally starting to take its toll on him. That means eventually, either I or my younger brother will have to succeed him—" "...Is the ranger position hereditary?" "In our territory, yes. The rangers are required to move to the managed lands with their families, and the children grow up familiar with the area from a young age. So, by the time they take over, the place is like their own backyard. ...And... it seems my father wants my brother to succeed him..."

Her expression clouded over, and she reached for a roasted fish—only to have her hand slapped away by me. "Teryus... my brother... he's been physically weak since he was little. To be honest, from my perspective, I don't think he can handle being a ranger. So, I told my father that I would take over. But he won't agree. He probably thinks a woman shouldn't inherit the position." "There's always someone like that. People with such outdated ways of thinking," I chimed in while stuffing my face with roasted fish.

"I kept trying to persuade him... and eventually, whether he understood or just wanted me to give up, he said he'd test me. I have to hunt a hundred pieces of prey in these mountains within five days. If I can do that—" "Wait, wait, wait, wait," I said, waving my hands. "Is a forest ranger, who's supposed to protect the woods, allowed to hunt forest animals for a reason like that?" "Eh!?" Camilla's face turned pale at my words. "Th-then... you don't mean... I'm supposed to hunt humans!?" "Nobody said that! I'm asking if it's okay to hunt animals on the Lord's land without permission!" "It's not part of our management area, so it's fine." "...Is that really okay...?" "And besides, the things I'm hunting aren't animals; they're goblins. G-O-B-L-I-N-S. Apparently, a pack moved in from the south a while ago, and they've settled in these mountains and are causing trouble. So, it's a goblin hunt that doubles as a test."

"...Oh... goblins. Is that so?" I muttered, looking away. *Wait... a while ago, in the south, didn't I destroy a goblin settlement with attack spells because they stole my lunch, and then vented my frustrations on every goblin I saw for a while after that...?* It was surely just a coincidence. Yes. I'm sure it was unrelated to this. Pulling myself together, I spoke up. "...Well, I get the general gist of the situation. So, what exactly do you want me to do to help?" "Look at my gear." She pointed to her bow and arrows with her eyes. "It’s enough for hunting normal animals or scaring off a couple of poachers, but against a pack of goblins, it's a bit unreliable." True—with just a bow and a knife, if they spotted her location, they would close the distance in an instant while she was nocking an arrow and overwhelm her with numbers. "In other words, I'm your bodyguard just in case." "Mm, or rather, to make it quicker, you can use a spell to put the goblins to sleep, and while they're defenseless, I'll pick them off one by one with my arrows, *thwip thwip*...!"

"Hold on a second." "What now?" "Doesn't that seem... terribly cowardly, even if they are goblins?" "Agh! Honestly! What is this person talking about?" She scratched her head vigorously with one hand. "Listen, my goal is to prevent my weak brother from having to do an impossible job. Hunting a hundred goblins in five days is just a test for that. There's no reason to make a test I'm taking myself any harder than it needs to be, right?"

"...Well... that’s true. Fine. But in exchange, don't forget the story about the orichalcum vein." "Of course." She nodded firmly at my words.

Some might wonder what a single person could do even if they were told the location of a vein. Actually, for a mage, there were ways. Among the arts I knew was a spell called "Earth Spirit Path". It interfered with the earth spirits to dig tunnels; when you cast it on the ground, a hole would simply pop open. Where the displaced soil went—honestly, I didn't quite know, but that didn't matter right now. The important thing was that orichalcum is a metal that is resistant to magical interference.

In other words: if you kept casting Earth Spirit Path on the spot where an orichalcum vein was, the unnecessary dirt and rock would disappear, and only the orichalcum, which was barely affected by the spell, would be left behind, effectively refined. I heard that this method was actually used at orichalcum mines. This was a task I could manage even by myself.

...Well, that was all well and good, but... "...So? Where are they? Those goblins?" As we walked through the pathless mountains, I threw the same question at Camilla's back for the umpteenth time. "I told you, we'll find them soon." The answer was, as expected, the same. Since we had reached an agreement, eaten the fish, and set out,

the two of us had been wandering through the mountains endlessly.

Camilla was moving forward with a confident stride, but to my eyes, it looked like she was just wandering aimlessly. However— It was exactly then that she came to a dead stop. "...What is it?" "Found them," she whispered, and suddenly quickened her pace. I looked ahead, but I couldn't see a shadow or a sign of anything like a goblin. "...Are you sure...?" "Shh." Camilla's small reprimand cut off my question. She continued in a low voice, "Be quiet. I found tracks that goblins passed through recently. And not just one or two. I'm following them now. They aren't far, and if we make noise, they'll notice us, so be quiet." "....."

I shut my mouth as told. Hmph. I suppose she wasn't just talking when she said she'd take her brother's place. She found those tracks so easily, even though they were completely invisible to an amateur's eyes. As I strained my ears, I realized that even though Camilla was moving through the undergrowth, she was making almost no sound with her footsteps. Before long, just as she had said— *Gegi! Gu, guke*— The sounds drifting on the wind were unmistakably the cries of goblins. Oh! Impressive! We proceeded toward the source with even more cautious steps. And then. In a spot where the forest trees opened up slightly, there they were—dozens of goblins! Camilla hid herself a short distance away and gave me a silent nod. I nodded back and began to chant a sleep spell under my breath—

"—I found you! Sister!" A man's voice echoed through the trees at that exact moment. *Gi!?* The goblins let out cries of surprise. I, and Camilla as well, shifted our gaze toward the voice— There, he was. Looking down at us from a slightly elevated spot a short distance away was a large man. He was a full head taller than your average guy. He had a muscular, sturdy build, a square, rugged face to match, and short-cropped black hair. He was dressed in light leather armor and carried a bow and arrows. Because of his rugged features, he looked quite old, but... The problem was that this man had just said "Sister."

"Tch!" Camilla let out a small click of her tongue. ...Wait... so... as I thought…

"...Is that... by any chance..."

"It's Teryus, my brother," she spat out irritably.

"...Um... he doesn't look like a 'Teryus,' and he doesn't look 'physically weak' at all..."

"I told you not to judge by appearances! And... if it bothers you that he isn't weak, we can just make him weak and solve the problem. So, Lina, change of target! Attack spell, go!"

"Wait, wait, wait!"

"What's your problem!?"

"Everything! In every way!"

As we argued, the man walked toward us. Camilla glared at him sharply.

"What did you come here for!?"

"...Ugh...!" He flinched for a second, then spoke.

"...I came to stop you, Sister. I heard the situation from Father. But a hundred goblins in five days is absolutely impossible, even for you. ...Stop this and let's go home together. I'll do my best to manage the ranger work somehow."

"What are you talking about!? I thought you, with your weak body, couldn't handle being a ranger...! That's why I went to the trouble of persuading Father! And now what!? It's impossible, so come home!? If you keep saying such selfish things, I won't forgive you even if you are my brother!"

"...Ugh...!" Teryus flinched again.

"...I... It's true that I can't say my body is very strong... After I eat your home cooking, Sister, my body always goes numb and I can't move..."

"See? It's fundamentally impossible for you."

"...Excuse me... hello..." I interjected into the siblings' conversation.

"...That... couldn't it be that Camilla is drugging you...?" The moment I voiced my opinion, both of their expressions changed. Teryus's face was one of realization and horror. Camilla's went pale. ...So, I hit the bullseye after all.

"...Come to think of it...!" Teryus said, sweat appearing on his brow.

"I've always wondered why you were growing paralysis mushrooms in the storage shed, Sister... Was it for that!?" *Notice it. Sooner. Much sooner.*

However, Camilla waved her hands desperately, refusing to admit defeat. "Wh-what is this boy saying!? Look! That's... that's for, you know, *that*! Right! I use them when I'm taking down poachers! See! Now you're satisfied!"

"...Sister, you've never taken down a poacher before. And yet, the mushrooms are

disappearing..."

"Guh...! To think you're checking things in such detail... Do you really distrust your sister that much!?"

"...No... I think it's perfectly reasonable to distrust you..." I muttered involuntarily.
"Argh, enough! In that case!" Camilla pointed at Teryus.

"Lina! Just do it!"

"Hold on." I placed a hand on her shoulder as she spoke. "The story seems to be quite different from what I heard...?"

"Th-that's...! That is, well! ...Agh! Anyway, it's a fact that I've hired you, so do as I say!"

"About that commission... after all these lies, your claim about 'telling me the location of an orichalcum vein' is starting to sound pretty fake too..."

"Th-that's true!"

"...Sister, surely..." Teryus chimed in from the side. "You aren't planning on telling her the location of the orichalcum vein that the Lord manages, are you...?"

Twitch. Of course—I didn't miss it. At Teryus's point, Camilla's body gave a small—but certain—shiver. "......Ho-hooooo....."

"......Th-that's....."

A painful silence followed. It was broken by— *Gegiiiii!* The cries of the goblins! Dozens of goblins were pushing through the trees and charging straight at us! "Ah! Right! I completely forgot about these guys!" I hastily began to chant a spell, while Teryus nocked an arrow—

A short while later, once we had scattered the goblin pack and driven them off: Camilla had already vanished.

"...Come to think of it, my sister really wanted to become a ranger..."

After driving off the goblins and moving to a new location, we settled into a small mountain hut a short distance away. Teryus spoke up as if he had just remembered. Such huts were scattered through the mountains so that people working there could find a place to stay for the night. Naturally, there was no furniture to speak of. It was truly just a shack.

"Why a ranger? She said something about it being a tough job..." I said, sitting down on a simple bed that was little more than a wooden box.

"Well, that's if you do it seriously," he replied, leaning against the doorway with a weak smile.

"...She said it often. That being a ranger is a job where you can slack off as much as you want. If you do the patrols properly, it's a hard job, of course... But if you go out under the guise of patrolling and just rest nearby, no one will know. Plus, since our territory has the condition that you live there with your family, the pay is apparently quite good. That's why..."

"I see... If her brother takes over, she might have to leave home and find another way of life. But if she takes over, she can slack off and the pay is decent... So she drugged you and persuaded your father so she could become the ranger herself. That's the gist of it."

"...Probably... It seems my sister has caused you a lot of trouble... I'm very sorry. ...So, um... I know it’s a bold request, but could you somehow lend me a hand in making my sister change her ways?"

"No, impossible. Absolutely impossible," I said, waving my hands. "Eh!? But between women, surely there are feelings a man wouldn't understand..."

"Look. It’s not a matter of men or women. Someone who thinks, 'I want to make easy money, so I'll drug my brother,' is already a lost cause in a sense. There's no helping them at this point. If there’s a chance she might reflect and reform... let's see... If you actually become a ranger, kick her out properly, and let her learn the hardships of the world... maybe something could happen."

"...I see..." He fell silent for a moment, then raised his head and turned a serious gaze toward me. "I understand. In that case, I will show that I can succeed him honorably."

"Yes, yes. That’s more like it."

"But before that, I have to stop my sister somehow." "...Stop her... how?"

"My father is a man who always keeps his word once it's spoken. Regardless of the circumstances, if he promised she could take over if she defeated a hundred goblins in five days, he will surely keep it. And my sister is the type of person who will do even seemingly impossible things to achieve her goal. So..."

"If we don't stop her here, everything will go according to her plan..."

"But... if it comes down to using force... I probably won't be able to lift a finger against my sister. ...Please. I know it's a selfish request, but could you please lend me your strength? I can't offer much in return..."

Saying that, he reached into his collar and pulled out a pendant with a red stone, stepped closer, and handed it to me.

"...Is this... a raw ruby!?"

"I found it in the mountains when I was a child. I don't know how much it's worth, but this is all I can do..."

"...Hmm..." I thought for a moment.

"Well, if you're going to ask me that directly and sincerely, I have no choice. Fine. I'll take this case."

"Really!? Thank you so much!" "...Heh-heh-heh-heh... Just you watch, Camilla. The foolishness of taking someone's fish and then trying to trick me... I'll make you feel it with your very body!"

"...Um, just stopping her is enough..." Teryus said in a weak voice right next to me as I burned with determination.

The next morning. We began our pursuit of Camilla early. For the record, we ended up staying in the hut last night, but Teryus had said, "It would be rude to sleep in the same room as a young woman," and went out of his way to sleep outside the hut. Hmm. Compared to his sister with her twisted personality, he was a true gentleman. If I always got requests from such decent people, I'd be much more motivated.

"...My sister will probably look for a goblin settlement nearby," Teryus said as we traveled through the trackless mountains. "Nearby? Even though she knows you came to stop her? Could she be—trying to outsmart us?" At my question, he shook his head.

"No. Knowing my sister, she'll think, 'If it didn't work here, I'll try nearby.'"

"...I see... well... she is the type who wants to be a ranger because she can slack off..."

"My sister has plenty of experience hiking in the mountains. She'll have a general intuition for what kind of place has what kind of terrain, and what kind of places goblins like. I can manage that much as well—"

BOOM! An explosion cut off Teryus's words! It wasn't exactly close, but it wasn't that far either. The two of us looked at each other— "—Let's go!" I started running.

"...But that was the sound of an explosion," Teryus said, running alongside me.

"...Your sister seems to be the type who doesn't care about the means as long as she gets results. Maybe she's firing off attack spells to defeat the goblins? She probably plans to tell your father, 'You told me to defeat the goblins, but you didn't say it had to be with a bow and arrow.'"

"No... neither my sister nor I know any spells other than the Lighting or Water Purification spells Father taught us."

"...Huh...? Then what was that just now...?"

The answer to the question came from up ahead. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! So you've finally shown yourself, Lina Inverse!" A loud, annoying, and piercing laugh echoed through the trees—someone's idiotic laughter!

"Tch...! I knew she'd show up!" I stopped and spat out the words.

"Wha... what is this voice!?"

Teryus was terrified. And the owner of the voice—she appeared from between the trees ahead of us. She wore a costume with an unnecessarily high level of exposure that seemed like a service to the mosquitoes! Spiky shoulder guards and a skull necklace around her neck! So you're still alive, Naga the White Serpent!

As she stood there blocking our way with an unnecessarily arrogant air, I glared at her intently. "Appearing like this in this situation...! I bet you! You've taken Camilla's side, haven't you!?"

"Hmph! That's right, Lina Inverse! We met last night when she ate the fish I had been catching without permission!" *Their meeting was the same as mine!?*

"...And? By any chance, were you told that if you just lend a hand to a sister who cares about her brother, she'll tell you the location of an orichalcum vein!?"

"Hmph! You're quite something, Lina! To read that much the moment we met! ...Wait, Lina, why have you suddenly become so depressed?"

"...No... just..." I shook my head and stood back up. *To think I was tricked by the same lie as this woman... as a human being, I really have to wonder about myself...*

"Please listen! The orichalcum vein my sister is talking about is managed by Lord Alantise!" Teryus cut in immediately. However, Naga didn't even show a hint of being shaken. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh! Did you think such a lie would work on Naga the White Serpent!? I've heard all about how you're a poacher trying to interfere with Camilla!" "...P-poacher..." Teryus's face turned pale at being called a lying poacher. I took a step forward. "He's not a poacher; he's Teryus, Camilla's younger brother!"

"Hmph! If you're going to lie, at least do it better, Lina Inverse! There's no way a weak younger brother would have such a rugged physique! And besides, what about his looks says 'Teryus'!?" "...I mean, even if you say that... I didn't exactly become rugged because I wanted to..."

"That's enough." I cut off Teryus, who was muttering something, probably because he was sensitive about it.

"...That was close, close... I almost made a huge mistake..."

"A huge mistake?" Teryus asked with a frown.

"Yes!" I said, pointing directly at Naga.

"Trying to persuade this woman with logic—that in itself is a fatal mistake! It's a waste of physical strength, willpower, and time! When faced with Naga, you only speak with violence!" "...Is... is that the kind of relationship you have?"

"Exactly!" As Naga and I declared this, our gazes clashed, sending hot sparks through the air. "Hmph. I don't really get it, but it seems a conclusion has been reached, Lina."

"I guess so." The answer was the signal to start. The spells from both Naga and me flowed through the trees!

(Inheritance Feud - Forest Rangers!: To be continued!)

The battle between Lina and Naga has finally begun! That part will probably be over in about fifteen lines, though! More importantly, can Lina and Teryus stop Camilla's ambition!? Or will Camilla be allowed to run wild in the world!? Next time: "Succession Struggle - The Forest Rangers" Part 2 Watch out for summer colds while you wait!

Inheritance Feud - Forest Rangers! [Part 2]

Once upon a time in the mountains. There was a woman scarfing down river fish that Lina had caught. She—Camilla—was aiming to succeed as a forest ranger in place of her weak younger brother. To do so, she had to clear the task given by her father: hunting a hundred goblins in five days. Lina lends a hand by chance. However, before the two of them, Camilla's brother Teryus, who was supposed to be weak, appears! Realizing she was being tricked by Camilla, Lina teams up with Teryus and decides to stop Camilla! As the two began their activities, an idiotic laugh they had heard somewhere echoed once again!

"Ice Arrow!" The two voices were released at exactly the same moment. The arrows of cold air created by magic crossed each other, freezing the ground and the plants. By then, both Naga and I had already moved from our original positions, dodging each other's attacks. Knowing that the first strike had been evaded, we both dashed through the trees while chanting our next spells without a moment's delay!

"Support!" Teryus jumped in from the side! As he ran, he readied an arrow and aimed it at Naga— *Twang*. His hand slipped, and the arrow flew in a completely different direction.

"Darn! I missed!"

"That's the least of your problems!" I reflexively stopped my spell and delivered a merciless retort. ...Wait! This was no time for retorts!

"Freeze Bullet!" *Krr-shhh!* The cold spell Naga fired froze the surrounding plants— Because I was distracted by my retort, my evasion was a split-second late, and the hem of my cloak was also sealed in ice.

"—Tch!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! That's an uncharacteristic mistake for you, Lina Inverse!" Naga's high-pitched laugh rang out as I groaned!

"To think you'd get distracted by a retort and let your movements get sloppy. ...Or... should I say it's extremely characteristic of you!? Anyway, prepare yourself, Lina!"

Naga chanted her spell. "Freeze Bullet!" *Krr-shhhh!* The spell she fired froze everything in the vicinity. Of course, by then, I had already dodged to the side. After quickly removing the cloak I had been wearing. "...Eh...!" Naga let out a dumbfounded voice, as if she hadn't expected me to dodge. Immediately—

"Ice Arrow!" *Krrr-shhh!* The spell I fired hit her head-on and froze her solid. Alright. That should do it.

Teryus let out a deep sigh of relief and wiped the sweat that was bead-thick on his forehead. "We managed somehow, didn't we, Miss Lina?"

"You didn't do anything!"

"Th-this is the cold sweat of tension!"

"...Oh... is that so... Well, whatever. Anyway, let's head to where Camilla is, fast!"

"Yes!" Teryus and I started running. We pushed through the grass and wove through the trees— But before long, we arrived at a spot where there were traces of an explosion. There was no sign of Camilla, nor the goblins.

"...This is..."

"Darn! It was a diversion!" I ground my teeth in frustration. She had Naga fire off attack spells a short distance away from where the goblins were likely to be. She drew our attention there, left Naga on standby, and in the meantime, she was goblin hunting in a different spot.

"Teryus! Lead me to where a goblin pack is likely to be around here! Hurry!"

"U-understood!" He answered, looked around, and ran off in one direction without hesitation. And before long, what we saw was—

"...What should we do... Miss Lina..." Teryus let out a pathetic voice as he stared into the campfire's flames, just as the sun was setting behind the mountain ridge. For the record, tonight's lodging was "Mountain Hut #2." Dinner consisted of locally sourced wild greens and a bird (rest in peace).

"Don't get so discouraged." However, my voice as I said that wasn't exactly cheerful either. In a single day, Camilla had hunted nearly thirty goblins. On the other hand, we had spent the whole day walking around and only found Naga and some hunted goblins. We hadn't seen Camilla even once. We were being completely outmaneuvered. It seemed that in terms of ranger abilities themselves, Camilla had

the upper edge over Teryus. Normally, of course, you couldn't hunt dozens of goblins with just a bow and a knife. However, the explosions Naga caused—no, the explosions Camilla *had* her cause—seemed to have served to surprise and herd the goblins in addition to luring us away.

And at the end of where the goblins were herded, various traps she had set were waiting with open mouths. In other words, the weapons she used weren't a bow and arrow, but the terrain, an understanding of goblin habits, and traps—meaning knowledge and wisdom. Looking at her efficiency, she really might hunt a hundred goblins within the remaining three days of the deadline her father set.

"I know my sister's skills well. She's the kind of person who could deal with me while humming a tune... And this time, she's serious. ...At this rate..."

"Th-that's why! If you're saying it's bad at this rate, then all the more reason you shouldn't just be depressed—"

"What kind of move should I make!? Thinking about that is what's important!"

"……That's true, but…… in the first place, if I can't even find my sister, there's no way to make a move……"

"There is! Plenty of ways!"

"Like what, exactly?"

"……Eh……?"

I faltered for a second when he asked.

...Well... honestly, I just said it because I thought there *might* be something...

But if I told the truth here, knowing Teryus, he would surely sink back into a deep depression, thinking, *'Ah, I knew it.'*

In that case... let's see...

"Camilla's condition was a hundred goblins in these mountains within five days, right?"

As I spoke, a brilliant idea flashed through my mind in an instant!

"For example! If I just blew up this entire mountain with an attack spell—!"

"Please don't say such reckless things!"

"Hmph. Then, if I burned down the whole mountain with a fire spell, the goblins Camilla needs to hunt would be gone, so—"

"Rejected!"

"Hmm..."

I tilted my head for a moment. "...What exactly is the problem with that plan?"

"What part of blowing up or burning down an entire mountain *isn't* a problem!?"

"……I see…… there's a risk that the person who built the mountain huts would get angry and demand compensation……"

"No... it's not about compensation..."

Teryus cut his words short. He stared into the light of the campfire, looking deep in thought.

"It might work. That move."

"The blowing up part? Or the burning part?"

"Not that! Please step away from the large-scale destruction! I mean the tactic of reducing the number of goblins my sister can hunt. I don't know how many goblins are in this mountain, but let's assume there are two hundred... Sister only needs to hunt half of them to clear the condition, right?"

"Ah. I see."

I nodded, catching his drift.

"That's it. If we hunt goblins too, and we defeat a hundred of them, Sister will have to defeat every single remaining goblin. Even for her, that should be impossible. And if we can defeat a hundred and one..."

"Then Camilla automatically fails the test!"

"Exactly!"

"Alright! Then we start our goblin extermination first thing tomorrow morning!"

The conditions were definitely in our favor.

"Fireball!"

BOOM!

"GYAGYAGYAAAA!?"

The goblins were blown away by my attack spell, scurrying in all directions.

The method was simple: Teryus would look around and point out spots where goblins were likely to hang out. I would then use a high-speed flight spell to fly to the indicated area in a flash. Once I found the goblins, I'd perch on a distant tree and unleash attack spells! Killing them was fine, but simply driving them off the mountain worked too. By repeating this a few times, the goblins began to vanish from the mountain in no time!

...At least, that was the plan...

"……Hey…… just how many goblins *are* in this mountain……?"

I asked dejectedly as noon passed.

No matter how many I defeated.

No matter how many, how many, how many, how many I took down, if I searched for a little while, I'd encounter a new pack of goblins and have to defeat them all over again. Since morning, I had already exterminated or scattered over twenty groups of them with my spells.

And besides.

"……And another thing! What's with the size of this mountain? Camilla casually called it 'this mountain,' but... isn't the area incredibly huge?"

"It is huge," Teryus affirmed plainly. "It’s not a very high mountain, but it spreads out at the base, so it covers a vast area."

"No... don't just say 'it is'! What are we going to do!? It's ridiculously huge *and* there are goblins everywhere you look! Our plan to interfere with Camilla’s ambition by hunting them ourselves might work if there were only two hundred goblins, but if there are five hundred or a thousand, this is just a drop in the bucket!"

"……T-That's true, but we don't have any other options. Blowing up the entire mountain was rejected without debate."

I patted Teryus on the shoulder. "It’s impossible to achieve something without a price."

"I’m saying an entire mountain is too high a price for stopping my sister!"

Hmph! He’s actually capable of a decent counter-argument!

"……But in that case……"

"Since there's no other way, we have to continue with the current method," Teryus said firmly as he walked through the pathless woods.

...Hmm... I took this job out of spite for Camilla, but... this is turning out to be a real

pain...

If this were a normal opponent, I could just find them from the sky, knock them out with an attack spell, and let them sleep until the deadline passed—but she's a pro at forest survival. Even while traveling with Naga, she's managed to keep her location completely hidden from us.

Rustle...

Teryus stopped in his tracks just as I was thinking about this.

"……Th-This is……!"

A shocked murmur escaped his lips. I hurried to catch up to him.

And there, I saw it.

A pack of goblins that had been hunted and defeated. There were about ten of them.

"……She's been busy…… Camilla……"

"No."

Teryus spoke without even looking at me as I muttered while scratching my head.

"No?"

"Yeah. This isn't my sister's handiwork. This is probably... Father's doing."

"Your father's!?" I let out a startled cry. "……You mean... the father who's a ranger somewhere else!?"

"Yes."

He turned around and nodded strongly. "He must have had the same idea as us and started hunting goblins! If that's the case, we might be able to stop Sister! Father's skill is even greater than hers!"

"Heh... but if that happens, knowing Camilla, she'll definitely complain that 'interfering is cowardly.'"

"It’s fine! Father is a man who always keeps his promises, but he’s also the kind of man who can boldly state a logical fallacy like, 'I never said I *wouldn't* interfere!'"

"……I don't know if that's something to be proud of, but as a human being, that's a bit... well, whatever! Anyway, let's continue the mission! Interfering with Camilla is top priority!"

"Exactly!"

Just as Teryus and I were about to take a new step toward finding more goblins—

"—Look out!"

I grabbed the back of his collar and leaped far to the side.

Immediately after.

WHOOSH!

A fireball descended from the sky, struck the earth, and burst into crimson flames.

This was—

"Naga!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I've been waiting for you, Lina Inverse!"

That all-too-familiar idiotic laughter echoed through the forest! Looking up, I saw Naga standing tall on a tree branch far above!

"……Waiting for us?"

I see. Just like yesterday, the plan was to have Naga stall for time while Camilla hunted goblins.

I won't let her!

"Teryus! Leave this to me and continue with the mission!" I said, without taking my eyes off Naga.

"……B-But……"

"Just go! You have to crush Camilla's ambition, don't you?"

"……U-Understood!"

I felt Teryus's presence move away. Then, I let a smile play across my lips.

"……Well now, Naga…… I'll give you plenty of attention."

Teryus ran. Through the trees.

The scent of the wind. The voiceless words of the plants and the earth.

The experience and intuition gained from growing up in the mountains since childhood led his feet toward the place where the prey lurked, without him even needing to think.

But before he could reach the prey—

A silhouette that glided out from the shadows of the trees brought him to a halt. Agitation flickered across Teryus's face.

"—Sister……!"

Yes. The person who appeared before him was none other than Camilla. Realizing Teryus had started interfering with her, she had decided to confront him directly.

"You've been quite busy, it seems. Do you hate me that much?"

"That's not it! I just……"

"Well, I don't care about the reason," Camilla said, tossing her hair back. "You want to get in my way. That's enough. ——Draw your bow. It’s a duel."

"……Eh……? A... duel……?" Teryus looked taken aback.

"Obviously. Isn't it annoying for both of us to keep dragging this out? So, let's settle it here. If I lose, I'll give up on becoming a ranger and go home with you. But in exchange, if you lose, you stop interfering and go home immediately. Got it?"

Camilla backed away to create distance between them. "The weapons are bow, arrows, and knife. You win if you make the opponent's bow unusable. Shooting the quiver is also allowed. If you understand, let's begin."

Without waiting for Teryus's answer, she loaded an arrow.

"Wait……! Sister……!"

Ignoring her flustered brother, Camilla drew her bow and released it toward him!

"Whoa!?"

A single arrow tore through the air, passing right by him and thudding into the trees behind.

"……You're…… serious…… aren't you, Sister……"

Camilla loaded her second arrow without answering.

"Then I……! I'll make up my mind too!"

Teryus pulled an arrow from his quiver and loaded it. "I'll stop you, even if I have to take you down!"

Their gazes met. In an instant, the arrows were released.

Camilla's arrow grazed Teryus's cheek by a hair's breadth. Teryus's arrow flew off in a random direction with a pathetic *twang*.

"Darn! I missed!?"

"That’s why I’m telling you it’s a problem of whether you're hitting at all!"

WHAM!

"Guh!?"

My flying kick struck Teryus square in the back of the head.

"L-Lina!?"

"Lina!?"

Both Teryus and Camilla cried out in shock.

"When did you get here?"

"What do you mean 'when'? I've been here from the start," I said matter-of-factly.

Camilla looked indignant. "Wai... Wait a minute! From the start? What about Naga?"

"Oh, her?" I gave a small shrug. "She got caught on a branch while jumping down from the tree, so I froze her solid with a spell."

"……She’s…… useless……"

"Well, obviously. It's Naga. ——More importantly."

I turned my eyes to Teryus, who was absentmindedly rubbing his head. "I thought it would be better if the settlement with Camilla was done by your own hand, so I was watching from the shadows... But what was that!? That weak-willed shot just now!? Even after saying you made up your mind!"

"……Well…… that…… I'm the type who's bad under pressure……"

"How do you expect to be a ranger with that attitude!?"

"Exactly. For once, I agree with Lina," Camilla added.

"Don't act high and mighty when you aren't even trying to do the job!"

Ugh. These two.

A sister who's skilled but plans to be a total slacker, and a brother who's serious but crumbles under pressure. No matter which one succeeds, the future looks bleak...

……

...Well, whatever. That's none of my business. If I'm going to knock someone down, it’s obviously Camilla, who stole my fish and tried to trick me!

"And so, Camilla!" I pointed directly at her. "Get ready to be blown away by an attack spell!"

"Wait! Wait a second! I'm in the middle of a duel with my brother...!"

"Shut it! There was no rule in your duel that said I couldn't unleash an attack spell from the side!"

"Then I'll make one now!"

"Rejected!"

The moment I spoke, a killing intent rose behind me.

"—!"

I instinctively leaped to the side. A blue light shot from behind, piercing the air and fluttering my cloak, grazing Camilla, and freezing the trees ahead.

I turned to see a dark shadow.

"Heh... then naturally, it shouldn't matter if I launch an attack spell from behind, right!? Lina Inverse!"

It was Naga, completely recovered from her icy prison.

It seems all the actors are finally on stage. In other words—now is the time for the showdown!

Naga and I, and Teryus and Camilla, glared at each other!

The silence that followed was a prelude to someone's destruction. I—and probably Naga as well—began to chant a spell under our breath—

Camilla was the first to move. With a fluid motion that didn't have a second's delay, she drew, loaded, and aimed at Teryus. Teryus also began his evasive movement just before her aim could lock. The tip of her arrow followed his movement.

And then.

"Ice Arrow!"

Naga fired her one-track spell at me.

"Windy Shield!"

I blew away the predictable attack with the strong wind spell I had already chanted.

At that moment, Camilla suddenly shifted her aim toward me and released her arrow!

A feint!? Nice try! I moved two steps and easily dodged the arrow.

Naga charged in! Planning for close quarters!?

The moment I thought that, Naga suddenly crouched and slammed her hand onto the ground.

"Ice Pillar!"

Starting from her hand, several white streaks raced across the earth! If you touched them, you'd be frozen. But conversely, you just had to avoid touching them.

I turned on my heel and froze for an instant. The spot I had intended to flee to was already covered in ice. Was this... because of the Ice Arrow Naga fired at first!? Don't tell me that first strike, which seemed like a simple repetition, was a calculated move to cut off my retreat after I blew it away!?

If I moved carelessly, I'd slip on the ice. But if I stayed here, I'd be frozen for sure. There was only one thing to do!

With a split-second decision, I kicked off the ground!

I slipped the moment I landed.

"Whoa-oa-oa-oa-oah!?"

If I tried to resist poorly, I'd definitely fall. I somehow kept my balance while sliding across the frozen ground.

Zing!

A stray arrow from the exchange between Teryus and Camilla zoomed past my eyes.

Whoa, dangerous!

I grabbed a nearby tree with one hand, used it as a pivot to turn, and dove into an unfrozen thicket. Behind me, the thicket froze over, and the spell finally stopped its progress. I circled around the thicket, jumped out, and faced Naga once again.

"Heh. I hope you enjoyed your skating session, Lina!"

"……Tch…… Not bad, Naga. Seems I underestimated you a little bit……"

I spoke with a dead-serious expression and took a wary step back. Naga followed suit and stepped forward—

Slip.

Thud.

She slipped on the very ice she had created, flipped over, slammed the back of her head, and stopped moving.

Alright! Just as planned!

...Well... even if her minor techniques have improved a bit, Naga is still Naga...

Now, only Camilla was left.

Teryus and Camilla were still exchanging arrows. Teryus was at a disadvantage. Camilla's arrows were precisely aimed at Teryus's bow and quiver; though he kept dodging, he was covered in scratches. But Teryus's arrows didn't even come close to grazing Camilla.

Of course, if I joined in openly, Camilla would realize the disadvantage and run. That would be a hassle. In that case—I'll settle this in one shot before she can escape!

I chanted a spell, placed my hand on the ground, and called out:

"Earth Spirit Path!"

Camilla turned around sharply at my voice. But to the naked eye, nothing had changed.

At that moment, however.

Thump.

With a dull sound, Camilla's lower half was buried in the ground. I had just used the tunnel-digging spell to extend a tunnel with no entrance or exit from under her feet. Her footing had collapsed because it couldn't support her weight. In other words, a magical pitfall.

"……A childish trick like this……!"

Camilla placed both hands on the edge of the hole to climb out.

"It is a childish trick. The pitfall part, anyway."

"Eh?"

Camilla's movement stopped for a second at my words—and then she finally noticed. The sound approaching from behind.

She turned to see a standing tree whose roots had been completely removed by my spell, falling right toward her.

And so, the battle ended.

Naga was upside down having hit her head, and Camilla was pinned under the fallen tree, motionless.

"……Is it over……?"

"Yeah. It’s over," I replied to Teryus.

He relaxed his shoulders and walked toward me.

"……Well, just to be safe, you should take Camilla's bow, arrows, and knife—"

Before I could finish.

"Hah!"

Suddenly Camilla sat up halfway and flicked her right hand with a sharp exhale!

This girl! She was just pretending to be unconscious!?

The knife she threw flew straight toward Teryus!

He wouldn't be able to dodge in time!

At that moment.

Clang!

A flying shadow intercepted the flying light in mid-air. Both lost their momentum and fell to the earth: the knife Camilla had thrown—and a single arrow.

"—!?"

Panic colored Camilla’s face as she stared deep into the trees.

A single middle-aged man stepped out slowly from the shadows. His black hair was streaked with white, and a black-and-white beard framed a stern, disciplined face. He wore the same ranger gear—bow, arrows, and leather armor—as Teryus and Camilla. But the weight of experience he carried—his sheer presence—was different from theirs.

"F—Father."

Teryus murmured at the sight of the man. That meant this was—

"—It's over, Camilla."

The father of the siblings declared to Camilla in a deep, heavy voice.

"……Wh…… Why!? It's not over yet! I still have days left……"

Camilla protested frantically as she crawled out from under the tree. But unlike before, her voice lacked its usual momentum.

"……"

"I—If you're saying I can't take over because I attacked Teryus, you're wrong!" Under

her father's silent gaze, she continued hurriedly, trying to patch things up. "The knife just now was aimed at Teryus's bow! And in the first place, it's this boy's fault for getting in my way! If he hadn't done that, I wouldn't have..."

"Camilla."

At the sound of her name, Camilla flinched and fell silent.

Hmm. Even a brat like her seems to find this old man scary.

"I'll say it again. It is already over."

"Why!?" Camilla's voice was filled with anguish. "Setting aside my case, you know better than anyone that this boy... that Teryus can't possibly be a ranger, Father! He's so bad under pressure that he'll just get killed by poachers the moment he starts the job! If that happened... I couldn't stand it!"

"……Sister……"

"That's why it would be a hundred times better if I became the ranger, took the pay, and spent my time relaxing in the shade!"

"How does that make any sense!?" I interjected.

But the father of the two shook his head with a sigh.

"……That's not it. That's not it, Camilla. It no longer matters what kind of rangers the two of you would grow up to be."

"It does!"

"No. It doesn't. Listen well to what I have to say. ——Teryus, you too."

He gave the two of them a sincere gaze and spoke in a solemn tone.

"Two days ago, it was discovered that I was embezzling funds, and I was fired from being a ranger. There is no longer any position to inherit..."

"Wait a minute, you old man!!"

Thud-thud-thud!

"Gah!"

The old man was flattened by a simultaneous barrage of stones from both Teryus and Camilla.

...Hmm... I guess Camilla's personality actually came from this guy...

"What was that!? Embezzling!? Fired!? I never heard anything about this!"

"I thought our lives had become strangely comfortable...! Is it because you were doing that, Father!?"

Even as the siblings hurled accusations, the old man, now seeing stars, obviously didn't answer.

...Whew...

The two let out a breath at the same time and looked at each other.

"……What now, Sister?"

"……What else can we do? If he's fired, he's fired."

"Then all the things we were doing were completely meaningless?"

"……Well…… let's just take this old man home and give him a piece of our minds."

"Then, Miss Lina, I guess that's that."

"Sorry for the trouble."

The siblings quickly and easily wrapped up the conversation, gave a light wave, and dragged the unconscious old man away, disappearing into the forest.

……Um……

All that was left was me, holding a sense of emptiness with nowhere to go, and Naga, who was still lying there.

——It was an event on a day when the mountain sunlight stung my eyes——

(*Inheritance Feud - Forest Rangers*!: The End)

Afternoon of the Sent-Off Wolves [Part 1]

"My daughter has been kidnapped."

The voice of the Lord, speaking with a downward gaze, was filled with anguish. The aides standing nearby also wore expressions that were a complex blend of anxiety, anger, and confusion.

"……The culprit is…… Sergei Andreas…… a man who supported me as one of my ministers……"

"……Wh…… What did you say……?"

The voice that escaped my lips was so faint that even I could tell.

——Winbow City.

A town that wasn't particularly large, located at the edge of the Raltigue Kingdom. It wasn't a big town, but it had a small castle and a Mages' Guild. While passing through on my travels, I had stopped by the guild to introduce myself, and was asked to go to the castle. As soon as I arrived, I was brought to meet the local lord, Berrywoods——and this was the first conversation we had.

"……In exchange for my daughter, he's demanding that I surrender my position as Lord. I cannot yield the position granted to me by the King to a traitor under threat! ……However…… she is all I have. I cannot abandon my only daughter……"

The Lord’s black hair was starting to show streaks of white—was it because of his age, or because of the stress? Even his well-tailored clothes looked somewhat worn out.

"I heard from the Mages' Guild that you are a reliable person. Even I have heard your name, Miss Lina Inverse. The minister also has several mages under him. Without your help, the rescue of my daughter…… of Lustina, cannot be achieved. Please! Lend me your strength! I will reward you handsomely! I beg of you!"

The Lord bowed his head deeply.

——Naturally——

"You don't even have to ask."

At my words, the Lord looked up sharply. "——Then——"

"Of course!" I clenched my fist tight. "A minister kidnapping a princess! And aiming for the position of Lord! I can't let someone who causes such a cliché triple-hit event go unpunished! As a human being!"

"……I-Is that the reason you won't forgive him?"

"Is there any other reason!? Anyway, please rest assured! No matter what sacrifice I have to make, I will definitely defeat the minister!"

"……Um…… I would prefer you prioritize the rescue of my daughter rather than defeating the minister……"

"I'll give it positive consideration!"

"……I—I'm feeling a bit uneasy for some reason…… No, I'm in no position to complain if you're helping us. Anyway, let's get down to business. I'll send some of my knights with you. They know Lustina's face. I'm sorry to rush you, but can you depart immediately?"

"——Wait. Before that——"

"What is it?"

"……So, how much is the commission fee exactly?"

The forest was filled with peace.

Green trees. The passing wind. Small birds chirping somewhere.

"……It's quiet…… isn't it……"

Yuri, a young knight with blonde hair, looked around and murmured.

"Hmph. It's too quiet."

The one who spoke was the other—Linz, an old knight with either silver or white hair. These two were the knights assigned to accompany me.

At first, the Lord had suggested sending ten fully armed knights, but I refused. Since this was a rescue mission, the top priority was not being noticed by the enemy. If you took ten or more knights whose armor clanked with every step, you'd stand out far too much. So, I narrowed the group down to two, and their equipment consisted of easy-to-move-in dark green clothes and swords—no armor.

The three of us were headed deep into the forest outside of town. The minister and his henchmen mages were supposedly holed up in a mansion that was once used as a villa by a certain noble. In other words, this was already enemy territory.

"We don't know where they might be lying in wait. Please be extremely careful."

Old knight Linz said this, probably directed at me. There was no sign of an ambush for now, but there was a possibility of booby traps. It was best to be careful.

"Still…… I wonder if the Princess is safe……?"

Yuri's voice was tinged with anxiety. He was in his mid-twenties, but because of his baby face, he only looked a little older than me.

"Surely…… Sergei and the others aren't doing something…… untoward to her……?"

"U-Untoward!?"

At his words, Linz let out a startled cry.

"Yes! Specifically speaking……"

"You don't have to say it!!"

Wham!

"Gwah!"

Yuri took my kick to the face and flipped right over.

"……W-What are you doing, Miss Lina! I was just getting all excited by myself while imagining all sorts of things!"

"Shut up! This is no time to be indulging in those kinds of delusions!"

"……Th-That's true," Yuri said, standing up while clutching his nose. "In other words, you're saying I should save the delusions for when things are calm, right?"

"……No…… I'm not exactly recommending delusions at all…… but, whatever……"

"Oh-oh-ohhhhh! Princess!"

Linz's voice interrupted my muttering. He furrowed his wrinkled brow even more.

"If…… if such a thing were to happen…… I, Linz will……!"

It seems he became anxious after hearing Yuri's words, as he clutched his head and cried out.

"Ugh! You must be suffering so much, Princess! If that's the case, I'd rather take your life with my own hands and put you out of your misery at once!"

"What do you mean 'If that's the case'!?"

Thump!

I kicked the back of his head too.

"Nothing’s even happened yet! In the first place! Why are you already considering killing her before checking anything!?"

"Oh! I wouldn't have noticed that if you hadn't told me!"

"Notice it! Even if I don't tell you! Think with your own head!"

……Well……

It’s true that there are men in this world who think of nothing but women. And there are pessimistic people who overthink things.

——But when a double-shot of them comes along, I don't know what to do.

And of all times, it had to be right now. To think a delusion-obsessed, frustrated man and a hasty, pessimistic old man were chosen to rescue a princess... is there a lack of talent in this knight order?

I looked up at the sky and whispered a silent prayer to Lustina, whose face I didn't even know.

——Sorry. I might not be able to rescue you.——

It must have once been a stylish mansion with many people coming and going. But now.

The garden was overgrown with weeds. Some windows had rotted away, and moss was expanding its territory across the walls and low fences.

However, from the gateless entrance to the front door, the lack of grass in that one area told the story that this place was by no means uninhabited.

"——This is it——"

I muttered, keeping a distance and staring at the gate and the building behind it.

"It is," Yuri nodded at my words. "This is where Princess Lustina is being forced into doing this and that by the minister and his followers..."

"You! Stop with the weird delusions! Stop the nosebleed!"

"……It’s difficult when you ask for something so hard……"

"It's difficult!?"

"It is for me!" Yuri declared firmly, puffing out his chest while bleeding from his nose.

...Th-this guy...

"Rest assured, Princess."

Beside him, the old knight directed a gaze full of resolve toward the hideout. "You must have suffered a terrible fate... but this Linz will put you at ease right now... heh-heh-heh-heh..."

"Don't kill her!!"

"……Wh—What are you saying, Miss Lina! I didn't say anything of the sort…… I just meant it in the sense of 'saving' her……"

"Then don't say it with bloodshot eyes while gripping your sword hilt! It's confusing!"

……For some reason, I feel like it would be better to lead these two into an enemy trap or something and deal with them before we meet Lustina……

"……So, Miss Lina, what do we do now? We don't know how many henchmen the minister—I mean Sergei—has. If we go in from the front and the Princess is taken hostage, wouldn't it be easier to just kill her ourselves?"

"I'm going to say this again, don't kill her. ……Let's see…… in that case……"

I thought for a moment. "What if I use an attack spell from here to blow up the whole mansion, and then we just dig out the Princess later?"

"Oh! That's it!" Linz clapped his hands at my joke.

……In this old man's case, it doesn't sound like he's joking……

"Rejected!! How is that different from Mr. Linz's opinion!?"

It was Yuri who raised an eyebrow in objection.

"……How is it different…… well, that's obvious." I held up one finger. "With my plan, if we're lucky, she'll be safe."

Again, I was joking. Just in case.

If the reward had been paid in advance instead of being a success fee, I might have actually done it.

Well, the sensible thing would be to wait for nightfall and then sneak in. But Yuri took my words seriously and bulged his eyes even more.

"Leaving it to luck!? We can't do that! Our mission is to rescue the Princess! We'll defeat the evil minister and his henchmen, and then the Princess and I will manage to

escape after the noble sacrifices of Master Linz and Miss Lina."

"……Hey."

"In the midst of surviving that crisis, a faint feeling will blossom between the two of us. And then, at an inn on the way back... ugh! Just thinking about it gives me a nosebleed!"

"……Um……" I turned toward Linz. "What should we do with this delusional man?"

"Hmm... for now, before he stains the name of the Knight Order, I should just take his life with my own hands."

"Ah. I agree."

But however. Before the two of us could put our agreed-upon opinion into action.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, birds flew out from the surrounding trees.

"!"

The three of us stood up, holding our breath.

The scenery around us remained unchanged. There were no other figures in sight—only a presence. A powerful, intense hostility directed straight at us.

Yuri and Linz both rested their hands on the hilts of their swords.

The wind made the leaves rustle softly.

"*...I smell it...*" a voice echoed.

"*The smell of... blood...*"

It was a muffled voice, as if the speaker were talking with something clamped in their mouth. A single bead of sweat rolled down the cheeks of each knight. Silence and a strained atmosphere filled the passing seconds.

Then—

Skree!

A bird cried out somewhere.

In that split second!

Rustle!

A dark shadow burst from the underbrush right beside us!

"Flare Lance!"

Fwoosh!

"Gah!?"

And just like that, it took a direct hit from the spell I had ready and collapsed to the ground.

...Ah... how weak.

I stepped closer to the twitching object to investigate. It was a single werewolf. Still conscious, it managed to lift its head and glare at me.

"...H-How... did you know... I was... here...?"

"What do you mean 'how'? Since you said you smelled something, I figured you were downwind. Simple logic."

"...D-Darn it...!"

"And one more thing for you to regret." I gestured toward Yuri. "That smell of blood you caught? It was probably just his nosebleed."

"....."

The beastman stared at Yuri's face in silence for a moment.

"...Hah..."

With a small sigh, his head thumped back onto the dirt.

"Is he dead?" Linz asked.

I shook my head. "He just fainted. But don't worry. Even if he wakes up, he doesn't have any strength left to fight."

To be lured out by the smell of a man's nosebleed, try to act cool, and then get taken down instantly... it was beyond pathetic. I'd want to faint too.

"In that case, is he one of the Minister's henchmen? If so, shall we squeeze him for information on their numbers and the Princess's location?"

"We don't have time for that."

I turned my eyes toward the mansion. "Someone will likely notice something is wrong before he talks. They'll realize their lookout is gone. If that happens, they'll catch on to us and prepare a counter-strategy. They'll use any info we have against us. We'd only be at a disadvantage. So, we charge in before that happens! Got it?"

The two men nodded.

We tied up the unconscious beastman, gagged him, and tossed him deep into the bushes. And so, our infiltration began!

The smell of damp, decaying earthen walls filled the air. Outside, the sun was still high, but the windowless corridors were pitch black. I wondered how long it had been since the candleholders lining the walls had last held light. There was no sense of anyone living here.

The three of us entered through the back door. First, we had circled the building from a distance. There were no signs of sentries, nor any hidden presences. Either the enemy's guard was lax, or there were foes capable of completely masking their presence. I chose not to think about the saddest possibility: that this wasn't a hideout at all, but just that werewolf's nest.

At this point, it felt like there wasn't much difference between the front or back door, but I followed the manual and slipped through one of the rear entrances. I led the way, followed by Linz, then Yuri.

The corridor stretched straight ahead. Several doors lined the sides, and it turned right at the end. The only light source was the glow filtering through the doorway we had entered—a door hanging halfway off its hinges, unable to withstand time and the elements.

The mansion was quite large for being in the middle of the mountains. It looked like a three-story building, but part of the roof had collapsed, so only up to the second floor was likely usable. I also had to consider the possibility of a basement.

Where was Sergei holding Lustina?

So far, other than the werewolf outside, there was no sign of the enemy. We proceeded to the end of the hall without incident.

"...This is a bit troublesome," I whispered, looking at what lay ahead.

There were no people.

At the end of the hall stood a decorative suit of full plate armor, beyond which lay an open area—likely leading to a central hall. Unlike the corridor, that hall was lit and well-maintained.

They were definitely here. The enemy.

"Troublesome... in what way?" Linz whispered.

I gestured toward the armor. "The mansion is falling apart, but that armor has no rust.

It's likely a Living Armor or something similar. There’s a mage among the Minister's subordinates, right? It probably has orders to attack anyone who passes in front of it."

"Is it a tough opponent?" Yuri asked from behind.

"Not if I use attack magic. However—if we fight, the clanking of the metal will alert the enemy. It's a sentry and a burglar alarm all in one."

"...So, it's impossible to pass without being noticed?"

I thought for a second. "...I might be able to manage. Leave it to me."

I chanted the spell.

"Van Rail!"

Flash!

My strike encased the standing armor in thick ice. Normally, this spell would freeze the target and then shatter it, but the sound of breaking ice would be noisy. So, I adjusted the spell to simply keep it frozen.

"...That should do it."

I began to move forward. If I had used regular ice, the Living Armor might have shattered it depending on its strength, but I had created magical ice. It wasn't something that could be broken by brute force.

The two followed behind me. Just before we reached the hall, a presence appeared behind us.

It happened simultaneously.

I spun around, my cloak billowing in the wind, just as a man appeared at the corner of the corridor and unleashed an attack spell.

"Flare Lance!"

A crimson light tore through the air. It was a mid-range ambush from behind in a narrow hallway. For someone unaccustomed to battle, it would have been a difficult attack to dodge. But I, of course, and Yuri and Linz as well, easily evaded the strike.

Boom!

The fire lance scorched only empty air and collided somewhere in the distance. By then, Yuri and Linz were already moving. They drew their swords without a word and dashed toward the mage!

However, just before they could close the distance, two beastmen emerged from the

shadows to cover the mage!

Stealth was no longer an option.

"This way!"

Following my voice, the two knights changed course, and the three of us broke out into the hall. The carpet, which must have once been red, was now black with the grime of ages. The hall wasn't lit by a chandelier—now a housing complex for spiders—but by magical lights someone had cast into the air.

And there, we had company. One mage and two beastmen. The same team composition as the one behind us. We were sandwiched in the middle of the hall.

"The Lord's men, I presume?" the mage from the corridor said. "But... the Lord really sent such third-rate trash? Even with his own daughter as a hostage."

"Heh... if we're third-rate, then what does that make you?"

The mage met my provocation with a sneer. "Oh my... quite a spirited young lady. Did taking down the beastman outside go to your head? And yet, you didn't even notice that your own companion has been wounded. To talk so big while being so oblivious... what impressive confidence."

"Wounded?" I muttered, frowning. In that brief skirmish, who could have possibly gotten hurt, and how?

"Indeed." The mage wore a look of utter contempt. "There was a trail of blood leading from the back entrance through the hall. Did you really not notice something so basic?"

...Blood...

...Wait... could it be...?

I slowly turned my head and looked at Yuri. He hurriedly looked away, scratching his head awkwardly.

...I knew it!!

While we were walking down the hall, this guy had slipped back into delusion mode and started bleeding from his nose again! The patrol must have found the trail. We really couldn't deny being called third-rate after that.

"To hell with it! We're breaking through!" I declared, half out of embarrassment and half out of desperation.

the other mage responded first.

"Fireball!"

He unleashed the spell he had been chanting without hesitation! I knew he was casting something. I jumped far out of the way! The other two were on their own!

KABOOM!

Flame, heat, and a roar thundered through the hall, driven by a gale. Yuri and Linz had also managed to dodge the blast.

Tch.

Before the heat even dissipated, two beastmen charged through the shimmering air! But before they could catch me in their sword range...

Slash!

A shadow leaped from the side. With a silver blade reflecting the crimson flames, he cut down the beastmen with ease. Standing with the dying flames at his back was—Linz.

What a waste! If this were a young, handsome guy, it would be a legendary scene. But this was no time for that.

"Freeze Arrow!"

I released my spell! The strike grazed past Linz, piercing through the heat-distorted air.

"Gah!?"

A cry of pain came from the other side. My strike, fired based on presence alone, seemed to have hit its mark. Whether it took them down or not, I didn't know. Either way, there were at least three left, one of them a mage. I scanned the area, but they were nowhere to be seen. Either behind the flames or hiding in the shadows. Linz and I kept a sharp eye on our surroundings.

Eventually, the flames dwindled and died out.

"!?"

The two of us let out a silent cry. Beyond the extinguished flames lay one frozen, unconscious mage. That was expected.

But further back, another mage and two beastmen lay cut down on the floor.

"Did Yuri do this? But if so... why is Yuri nowhere to be seen?" Linz muttered, frowning.

It was true. Yuri was gone. If he had been defeated, he'd be lying around somewhere. If not, what reason would he have to go off on his own...?

...Actually, he had a very specific reason.

"This is bad!" I shouted.

"What is it, Miss Lina?"

I turned to Linz. "That guy! He's planning to rescue the Princess alone and put his delusions into action! She's in danger!"

The color drained from Linz's face so fast it almost made a sound.

"N-N-No... no matter how you look at it, a member of the glorious Knight Order wouldn't..."

"Yuri would! He'll do it, he'll definitely do it! Or can you swear that he would never do such a thing!?"

Linz froze for a moment, then shook his head violently. "...W-We can't stay here! If such a thing were to happen, it would be a disgrace to our Order! In that case, before it comes to that! I'll just have to cut down Yuri and the Princess myself!"

He let out a yell, spun around, and ran deeper into the hall!

"Wait! You don't have to...!"

...*You don't have to cut down the Princess too!*

As I started to say that, killing intent rose behind me! I jumped to the side. Several fire arrows whizzed past and vanished into the void.

"...Darn... it...!"

The mage who had been slashed by Yuri used the last of his strength to fire, then collapsed onto the floor, motionless.

...Ah!

By the time I turned around, Old Knight Linz was already out of sight.

Bad.

Bad, bad, bad, bad!!

I clutched my head in a silent scream. I didn't know the Minister's personality, but since he was using Lustina as a bargaining chip, he wouldn't harm her unnecessarily.

However, Yuri and Linz were different. They were driven by their own fixations and

there was no telling what they'd do. The current situation was like releasing a hungry tiger and a wolf to save a rabbit caught by a raccoon.

At this rate, I had to find Lustina before those two did and rescue her myself. Otherwise, her life was over.

There wasn't much time left. And I didn't even know what she looked like. Still—I had to do it. No matter what.

Relying on intuition and luck, I dashed toward one of the doors at the back of the hall. Beyond it was a long passage. No sign of people, but it was reasonably clean. I was about to sprint down it when—

I stopped.

Creak...

A door opened. One of the doors facing the passage, a bit further down.

A figure stepped out with a slow pace.

She looked a little older than me. Short blonde hair with soft waves and blue eyes. Her magnificent figure was encased in red armor, and in her right hand, she held a rapier already drawn.

Her refined face showed no expression. I reached for my short sword and began to chant a spell—

Then, a possibility occurred to me.

"No way..."

Instead of a spell, a question left my lips.

"Are you... Lustina?"

"What if I am?"

The voice that came back was devoid of emotion.

...I knew it... so that's it...

Using magic to control the hostage and make her fight us... a clever trick, even if it was the enemy's. As the one coming to save her, I couldn't exactly take her down. That meant I'd have to hold back, putting me at a disadvantage.

Lustina and I faced each other across a short distance for a moment.

"...Here I come."

Lustina leveled her sword and kicked off the floor!

Will Lina be able to rescue Lustina safely!? Can she protect her from the reaching hands of Yuri and Linz!?

...Eh? The Minister?

Oh right, that guy. He was around, wasn't he? (Stares into the distance)

Whatever. He’s ancient history now. Sometimes, forgetting is an act of kindness.

Anyway, stay tuned for the conclusion in the second half of "Afternoon of the Sent-Off Wolves"!

Afternoon of the Sent-Off Wolves [Part 2]

The kidnapping in Winbow City. The victim was the Lord's daughter, Princess Lustina, and the kidnapper was Minister Sergei! Lina’s anger exploded at this textbook cliché of a conspiracy! Accompanied by two knights—Yuri, whose delusions of a romance with the Princess were constantly running wild, and Linz, who wanted to eliminate everyone involved before things got out of hand—Lina charged into the Minister's mountain hideout!

However, in the middle of the battle, Lina got separated from the two rogue knights! If they found Lustina first, she’d be in danger! As Lina began her solo search, a woman appeared before her!

—Lustina!?

At Lina’s call, however, the woman drew her sword!

"And so, Fireball."

KABOOM!

"KYUNYAAAA!?"

With a burst of flame and light, my strike sent Lustina flying. I tried to dial back the power, but using it in a hallway was still deafening. I rubbed my ears as the ringing clung to my eardrums and walked toward the fallen Lustina.

Naturally, I didn't hit her directly. I blasted the wall slightly behind her, using the shockwave to knock her out. Plus, her body acted as a shield, reducing the blast reaching me! It was a perfect point of impact!

She had dropped her sword and was completely unconscious. She was a little scorched here and there, but compared to falling into Yuri's clutches or Linz's "mercy," this was about 175 times better. Probably.

Anyway, I got Lustina! Now all I had to do was take her back, but it was a bit tough for me to carry her with my own strength.

In that case—

I chanted a spell.

"Levitation."

Using the levitation spell to carry her, I left the building.

"...Ugh..."

She regained consciousness while we were drifting over the forest after leaving the mansion.

"Oh. You're awake."

I lowered our altitude. If the shock from earlier had brought her back to her senses, great. If not, there was a risk she'd start thrashing around in mid-air.

"...Ugh... eek!?"

Realizing she was in the air, she let out a small shriek and her whole body stiffened.

"Calm down, Lustina. I'm not an enemy. I came to save you."

I spoke slowly in a calm tone to put her at ease.

Twitch.

For some reason, she flinched at my words and glanced over her shoulder. Her gaze wasn't that of someone being controlled. But the look in her eyes wasn't relief; it was a shadow of fear.

"...Um..."

"What is it, Lustina?"

When she asked in a frightened voice and I replied gently, she shrank back again for some reason.

"...Um... please, don't be angry, okay...?"

"Don't be silly. Why would I be angry?"

"...I... um... actually... I'm not Lustina."

Freeze.

My movement stopped for an instant. It took a split second for my brain to process the meaning of her words. Then, I suddenly controlled the spell and shot upward. The ground receded rapidly.

"I—I mean, as soon as we met, you said 'You're Lustina, aren't you!' so I thought it would be easier to fight if I used that misunderstanding! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Realizing what I was about to do, she started blathering at high speed.

"I'm just a lowly traveling mercenary hired by the Minister! I'll tell you where the real one is, so please, just don't drop me from this height! I beg you!"

"....."

I stared into her eyes in silence for a moment.

"Is that the truth?"

"It's the truth, it's the truth! I mean, I don't have the guts to lie to someone who unleashed an attack spell without hesitation even while thinking I was the Princess!"

She was turning pale and shaking her head violently, her eyes welling with tears. It didn't look like she was lying.

"...Fine. In that case, I'll at least spare your life."

"'At least'? Um, I feel like there are other things I'd like you to spare too."

"That depends on your attitude."

I descended and landed on a path through the forest. I reached behind my waist and pulled out a rope.

"If you follow through on your word and lead me to the real Lustina, I'll overlook everything except the contents of your wallet."

"...So you won't overlook the wallet..."

"Obviously. ...I mean, if you're a mercenary, you should be prepared for the fact that losing a battle is synonymous with death. If you can get away with just your wallet, it's a bargain."

"...I... I guess you're right... I give up... By the way, what is this...?"

She raised her wrists, gesturing to the end of the rope I had just tied. "...Does this mean you won't let me escape? Oh, no, of course I won't even try."

"What are you talking about? Of course not." I shook my head with a smile. "It means: *Follow me as if your life depends on it*."

"...Eh?"

There was no time. I ignored her as she tried to say something else and chanted a spell.

"Raywing!"

"NUKYAAAAAAA!?"

Using the high-speed flight spell, I dragged the screaming woman behind me as I sprinted back the way I had come.

"What... on earth...?"

The "Fake Lustina" let out a faint, sigh-like murmur at the sight.

Deep inside the hideout. In the basement reached through a hidden door, there were piles of fallen people... people, people...

There were mages. There were warriors. Even beastmen were lying there. They were the Minister's men. Every single one of them had been taken down with a single blow. Likely the work of either Yuri or Linz.

There was no time to hesitate. I looked at the Fake.

"Well? Where's the real one?"

"...Ah... uh... go straight through here... eek!?"

I pulled her hand before she could finish and ran down the passage.

"Turn right at the corner...! It's the second door on the right...!"

I didn't need to be told. I had already stopped in front of it.

It was a stone room. Naturally, there were no windows. The red carpet and the bed—not high-end, but of good quality—were clearly out of place given the age of the building. The reason I stopped there was simple: the door had been sliced open. A thick oak door had been slashed from the outside with a blade—likely a sword—and its pieces were scattered on the floor.

"...This was... the room," the Fake said in the past tense, standing beside me.

Yes. There was no one left in the room.

That meant Yuri had arrived first. If Linz had gotten here first, there was a high chance Lustina would have been cut down on the spot. Yuri's ambition was to fulfill his delusions, so he must have taken her out of here.

In that case, there was still a chance to get her back!

"Let's go, Fake!"

"Wait! My name isn't 'Fake'—!"

"Heh heh heh..." I placed a hand on her shoulder. "To protest about your name at the risk of your life while I'm in a hurry... you've got guts. In honor of that, I'll at least hear your real name before you die."

"Aaaah, no, no, my name really doesn't matter, Fake is perfectly fine! Um... er... that's it! Since we don't know where the real one went, I'd just be in the way, so I was just thinking what a lovely day it would be for me to head back to my hometown!"

As she blathered in confusion, I offered some words of comfort.

"In the way? Don't say that. I'm sure you'll be useful eventually. As a shield or a decoy."

"...No... um... if possible, I'd prefer a way to be useful that lets me leave with all my limbs intact."

"Well, put aside the nonsense jokes and let's go."

"Nonsense...? I'm being incredibly serious here!"

I pulled her along as she cried out in protest and we ran back through the passage.

"NUDUWAAAAAH!"

A sudden scream came from ahead. A man came sprinting toward us with a look of desperation, jumping over the fallen men. He seemed to be running away from something.

"Minister!?" the Fake cried out in surprise.

Minister!? *This* guy!?

I took a good look at him. The man who kidnapped Lustina—his name was Sergei something. His clothes were quite fine, but he looked to be in his mid-twenties. Slender and quite handsome. He looked nothing like the image I had of a "Minister" named Sergei. He looked more like a young secretary.

"Waaaaiiiiiitttt!"

The voice of the pursuer echoed from behind him like it was coming from the depths of hell.

—That's Linz!

"Help! Help me!"

The man—the Minister?—cried out pathetically and hid behind me and the Fake. Emerging from behind him was—just as the voice suggested—Linz, sword in hand, his eyes completely bloodshot!

Ohhh. He's clearly gone off the rails.

He glared at me and said, "...Heh heh heh... I see... you've betrayed us... or perhaps you were an enemy spy from the start?"

He licked his blade and continued, "Well, it doesn't matter. Either way, I'll just have to end you with my own hands!"

He spat out a classic villain line and charged without even giving me time to argue! But I expected that reaction!

I released the spell I had ready!

"Fire Arrow!"

Over a dozen fire arrows materialized before me and rained down on Linz! In the narrow hallway, there was nowhere to hide!

However!

Linz stopped without panic, swung his sword once, and then slammed his body into the right wall.

Crash!

The wall crumbled and swallowed Linz! The flames pierced only empty air!

No way! He cut the stone wall with his sword and dove in there!?

"Too naive!!"

He burst out from the hole and charged!

I didn't have time to chant another spell! In a moment like this—I'm glad I have a living shield! I reached behind me, grabbed the Fake's head, and yelled:

"H-Yah!!"

"NIHYEEEEE!?"

Ignoring her scream, I threw her at Linz!

As the Fake tumbled forward, Linz's sword flashed—but luckily, she tripped and dodged the blade's path, accidentally tackling Linz's legs.

"Wadadadada!?"

The two fell in a tangled heap. Yes! Now's my chance!

I grabbed the Minister, ran back down the hall, turned a corner, and opened the door to the first room.

"Stay still in here!"

The Minister scrambled into the room. I swung the door wide open toward the hallway and hid behind it.

"...Eh?" the Minister muttered in confusion. Then—

"...Theeeere youuu aaaaare!"

The sound of Linz's voice and footsteps approached. The footsteps stopped in front of the room.

"Found youuu. Seeeeergeeeeei."

"UZUHAAAAAAAH!?"

Voices of obsession and terror echoed as the footsteps moved into the room.

Yes! Now!

I jumped out from behind the door and unleashed my spell!

"Fireball!"

"!?"

The two inside looked at the sphere of light I had thrown—and I kicked the door shut.

KA-THOOM.

The explosion echoed deep in my gut. Behind the blown-off door, Linz and the Minister were both nicely scorched and knocked out cold.

"Do you usually blow people up along with yourself!?"

The Minister's first words upon waking were a protest. His way of speaking was surprisingly polite, unlike his name and title suggested. By the way, I had the Minister, Linz, and the Fake woman—who had fainted earlier—all tied up so they couldn't resist.

...Um...

I thought about his words for a second. "...I mean, it's not like you're an ally, so why is it bad to blow you up?"

"If you tell me to 'stay still in here,' anyone would think you're hiding them! Usually!"

"No one on the Lord's side would think I'm hiding them in this situation! Usually! ...Wait, this is no time to be arguing. I have to go after Lustina."

"Go after her?" the Minister asked, frowning.

"The other knight, Yuri, took her and ran. And he's..."

"Yuri!?"

At the mention of his name, the Minister's face turned pale and his voice went up.

"The Yuri who is always at the top of the Knight Order's 'Men We Want to Arrest Before Something Happens' list!?"

"...What kind of talent pool do you have in this Knight Order...? Anyway, that doesn't matter! Lustina is in danger!"

"I know. That's why..."

"Please take me with you!"

.....

"...Eh?"

My eyes went wide at the Minister's words. Why would a man who kidnapped her and held her hostage worry about her safety after being defeated?

"Please! I know the Princess's face, and I can predict Yuri's actions to some extent!"

He kept pleading as I hesitated.

Of course—I had no objection to taking him along. In fact, I had intended to anyway. Ensuring Lustina's safety was important, but handing this guy over to the Lord was also vital. There were likely still henchmen in the mansion; leaving him here would be the same as letting him escape.

I didn't know why he said he'd "come along," but it was certainly easier to have him come voluntarily than to drag him by force. I could ask about his intentions on the way.

"Fine. Let's head out immediately."

"Yes!"

Leaving the Fake and Linz behind, the Minister and I set off to rescue Lustina!

"...But you know... you don't look like a Minister at all," I said to the man running beside me as we dashed down the mountain.

We dashed toward the foot of the mountain—Winbow City.

"...Yes... that... that was exactly my dilemma..." Sergei said with an expression of deep suffering. "The reason I started this whole incident... of course, there was a desire for power, but aside from that, *this* was the major cause..."

"A Minister..." he continued. "Usually, people imagine someone stout, or perhaps thin with piercing eyes, or maybe someone with a thick beard. Despite being in a

profession with such an image, my constitution makes it impossible for me to gain or lose weight. My beard is thin and barely grows... To top it off, I'm in my mid-thirties, yet I'm still mistaken for someone in their mid-twenties!"

"Huh!? Mid-thirties!?"

I couldn't help but shout, looking at him again. He really didn't look a day over twenty-five.

He continued in a tearful voice, "...People meeting me for the first time always whisper behind my back, 'That guy doesn't really fit the image of a Minister named Sergei.' It was so frustrating... so humiliating..."

Was it really that frustrating?

"I felt I had to do something 'Minister-like'... So, what is a Minister-like thing to do? After much thought, the answer I reached was this plan: kidnap the Princess and overthrow the government!"

"THEN JUST DO YOUR ACTUAL JOB!!"

THWACK!

"Guegh!"

I kicked him squarely in the back, sending him face-first into the bushes.

"I get how you feel! But if you want to be seen as a Minister, just do Minister-like work!"

"Of course! Why didn't I think of that!?" He scrambled up with a look of sudden realization and regret. "...Heh... I suppose... I was a fool... If only I had met someone like you sooner..."

He looked up as if remembering something. "By the way, what exactly is the 'Minister-like work' you're talking about? Specifically?"

"Eh?"

Caught off guard, I thought for a moment. "...Um... embezzling public funds? Collusion with corrupt merchants?"

"Those are just crimes again..."

"Quiet, you! I'm not a Minister, so I don't have to know! ...More importantly, why did you decide to come with me anyway?"

"...Well... that is..." He flushed slightly and looked away. "Even though I took her hostage, I never intended to actually harm Princess Lustina. But Yuri is different. So,

it's only natural to stop him."

Aha.

"I see. You like her, don't you? The Princess."

"Wha—! I... I simply...!" His face turned even redder, and he waved his hands frantically. "...I mean, of course... I don't dislike her... but I'm just... yes! Doing what is natural for a human being!"

...Hmm... his reactions are incredibly honest...

"Fine, whatever! Anyway, let's hurry to the city!"

"The city...?" He frowned. "Wait a minute. Are you planning to go to Winbow City?"

"Yeah. ...Don't tell me you're getting cold feet now because you'll be arrested if you go there?"

"No, it's just... our goal is to rescue the Princess from Yuri, right?"

"Yeah. So—"

"So, he isn't in the city."

I was stunned into silence by his sheer confidence.

"What do you mean? Look, I clearly heard Yuri muttering about being 'lovey-dovey with the Princess at an inn' on the way back. It didn't sound like a lie to trick us..."

The Minister pointed a finger at me. "Naive! That's only Phase Two!"

"Phase... Two...?"

He nodded gravely. "Exactly! Certainly, Yuri's delusion of 'staying at an inn together' is perfectly natural for a man! And if the innkeeper says, 'We only have one room left,' it's perfect!"

"...Is that... really how men's minds work...?"

"It is! However! Yuri would have realized something soon after! It's autumn, and we're in the mountains! There is only one possible conclusion!"

"Um... sorry. I don't follow."

"Gah! This is why young people today are...! In the mountains during this season, it's only natural that it gets cold at night! Which means! The 'it's cold, so let's sleep together to keep warm' scenario! How could he pass that up!? Ideally, a snowy mountain is best, but we're currently in the 'tasty' situation of escaping from enemies after a rescue! Since they might be spotted by pursuers, they can't even build a fire!

The Princess is shivering from anxiety and cold...

'Oh... what happened to the others...'

'They are likely gone... but do not fear. I will surely protect you.'

'I see...'

'You're shivering... are you cold?'

'Yes... a little... hey... can I come over there?"'

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S 'COLD,' YOU IDIOT!!"

CRUNCH!

My kick connected with the Minister's face just as he started his one-man play.

"Wh-What was that for!?"

"Don't 'what was that for' me! You suddenly started a cringeworthy solo performance! Are you just another delusional creep like Yuri!?"

"H-How rude! Most men are like this!"

"Don't lie! Besides, in that situation, a girl would normally just say, 'It's cold, so lend me your coat!'"

"Aaaah... crushing a man's dreams and hopes like that..."

"Women don't exist to fulfill your dreams and hopes! More importantly! You're saying Yuri is moving toward realizing *that* specific delusion?"

"Exactly. If it were me, I definitely would! It’s a brilliant combo: a prelude in the mountains followed by flirting at the inn the next day! Yuri is undoubtedly aiming for that and is still wandering these mountains with the Princess!"

Well... whether all men are like that is one thing, but it takes one delusional man to know another.

"So, do you have a place in mind? Does it have to be a mountain hut or a cave?"

"No, that depends on taste... but the conditions are: a place where they won't run into pursuers—away from the route between the hideout and the city. Next, to make the Princess feel like they're truly 'escaping,' he’ll choose a route that is mostly downhill. Also, if she sees the city along the way, she'll realize they're going in the wrong direction. The only route that fits all those criteria... is this way!"

I followed as the Minister dashed off.

...I bet this guy has committed a similar crime before... I muttered to myself.

The birds fell silent. It felt as if even the wind had stopped. A sudden, intense killing intent flared.

"Dodge!"

I kicked the Minister out of the way and used the recoil to leap sideways!

Whish!

The sound of air being sliced and the faint glint of silver passed through the space where we had just been.

"Come out, Yuri!"

A moment of silence followed my call. Then, the bushes rustled.

"...Miss Lina... Oh? Why is the Minister with you?"

It was, of course, Yuri. He held a drawn sword in his right hand. The killing intent he radiated was like an aura shaking the air. He had detected our approach and come to intercept us. What he had just thrown was likely a hidden knife.

He stepped closer slowly. "...Well, either way, I can't have you interfering between me and Princess Lustina. You know what they say: 'Those who get in the way of true love should become ogre bait.'"

"Love only works if both parties agree!" I said, edging away.

"There's no way the Princess could dislike me."

Yep, he’s hopeless. There was nothing left to do but fight. I chanted the spell.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Over a dozen arrows of cold air shot through the void toward Yuri like the fangs of a hungry beast!

But!

"Too slow."

With half-steps to the side, slight twists of his body, or a minor tilt of his head, Yuri evaded every single one with the absolute minimum movement required.

...Who *is* this guy!?

"My turn!"

Yuri roared and kicked off the grass! Fast!

Clang!

I barely managed to parry his strike with my short sword.

"Oh, you're not bad. But...!"

I struggled to deflect Yuri's flurry of slashes. I'm better with a sword than your average warrior, but I was nothing compared to him. Yuri was holding back on purpose. That was the only reason I could even hold him off—if he got serious, I was in trouble.

As I parried, I began to chant...

"—PRINCESS LUSTINA!!"

Stop.

At that moment, the Minister's shout caused Yuri to freeze completely.

"Princess Lustina! Where are you!?"

He was calling out to her, knowing she had to be nearby.

Realistically, she wouldn't come running to the man who kidnapped her—but to Yuri, that voice was a danger that could reveal the truth to her.

"Silence!"

Yuri turned his back on me to strike at the Minister.

But—

"Freeze Arrow!"

Flash!

My spell hit him from behind, encasing the obsessed Yuri in ice.

Battle over, silence fell. The silence was broken by a small rustle in the bushes.

Out popped a little girl, maybe three years old, wearing an out-of-place, cute dress.

"Oh! Princess Lustina!"

"Ah— Ser-gei!"

The two hugged, rubbing cheeks together. The Minister's face was flushed with joy.

".....Wait just a second."

I grabbed the Minister's shoulder with a firm grip.

"Yes? What is it?"

I looked at the wide-eyed little girl. "...Lustina...? This three-year-old?"

"How rude! The Princess just turned four the other day!" the Minister stated clearly.

...Well, come to think of it... he only said he'd bring someone who knew her face. I never actually asked how old she was...

"I see... so..." I looked at the frozen Yuri. "That guy was getting nosebleeds and trying to realize delusions with *this* kid?"

The Minister nodded deeply. "Absolutely... he's a truly outrageous scoundrel."

"SO ARE YOU!!"

CRUNCH!

My kick buried itself in the Minister's head. He staggered back up.

"Th-That's different! Don't group me with someone like him!"

"HOW is it different!?"

"Mine is a pure 'long-term investment' or 'futures trading'!"

"IT'S THE SAME THING!!"

WHAM.

With one final, full-power kick, the Minister was finally silenced.

"Waaaaah!"

Hearing Lustina's crying voice somewhere in the distance, I stood there, feeling utterly hollow...

At any rate—the incident was over. Lustina didn't even seem to realize she had been kidnapped. Naturally, the Minister's faction—along with Yuri and Linz—were all rounded up and bound.

Yes, the incident was over. Technically.

However—Sergei's words stuck in my mind like a piece of food I couldn't swallow.

'The Yuri who is always at the top of the Knight Order's "Men We Want to Arrest Before Something Happens" list...'

...Are there more of them? That type of guy... in this territory?

...Well, good luck, Lustina.

Under the traveling sky toward another town, I sent a silent, irresponsible prayer to the little Princess...

(The Afternoon of the Sent-Off Wolves: END)

Zelgadis: Hazy Moon Chronicles

The moon was visible between the rustling leaves of the trees. Feeling the night wind, smelling of greenery, brush against his cheek, he suddenly came to his senses and let out a bitter smile. His mouth was hidden by a hood.

—I don't like crowds.

Yet, even for him, there were people he could call "companions." Though they now walked different paths, there were times while camping out when he realized he was looking up at the sky and thinking of them. Just like today. And every time, he would smile bitterly.

It had likely started when he met them—the fact that he no longer found his own body as loathsome as he once did.

Yet, the desire remained. To return to his original body—a normal human body. A desire so strong it felt like a physical hunger.

Once—he had craved power.

'If power is what you want, shall I give it to you?'

He had nodded at the words of a certain mage—and he gained power. By being synthesized with a blow-demon and a stone golem, he lost his human form.

And so, the battle began. Zelgadis's long, aimless journey to find a way to restore his body.

Though he retained the refined features he had as a human, his hair was now like strands of silver wire, and his skin reflected the moonlight like cold stone. To avoid the curious stares of others, he usually hid his face under a white mask and hood, often spending his nights camping out rather than staying at inns.

Leaning his back against a tree trunk, he closed his eyes—

Twitch.

His body shivered slightly, and his eyes snapped open. A presence had appeared abruptly. A strong presence directed at him—

Killing intent.

The source was where his gaze landed.

In the moonlit mountain, blending into the shadows of the undergrowth, something

stood there. It was about the size of a tall man. Though he could only see a silhouette, it was definitely not human. It had an unnaturally long neck and arms, and where a face should be, two red lights glowed.

Dash!

In an instant, it leaped. Simultaneously, Zelgadis grabbed the sword beside him and dashed across the ground.

Slash!

The grass rustled as the two shadows crossed paths. Zel's silver blade grazed the opponent's body, while the opponent's weapon grazed Zel's cheek. Zel and the monstrosity spun around to face each other again. His sliced mask fell away, exposing Zelgadis's true face to the moonlight.

At that moment, the killing intent vanished from the creature. It leaped backward and disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

.....?

He didn't know why he had been attacked, nor why the opponent had suddenly left. However, he didn't feel like chasing after it to find out. If it was a chance encounter, it no longer mattered. If he was being targeted, they would come back even if he didn't give chase.

Still, he didn't feel like camping here anymore.

"...I'll move... to another spot..."

He sheathed his sword, picked up his gear, and began to walk in the opposite direction from where the creature had vanished.

"Stop right there!"

A voice called out from the side not long after. The lights of a small village at the foot of the mountain were starting to come into view. He had noticed the presence a while ago but hadn't said anything because it was simply a bother.

"I found you! You won't get away this time!"

The voice belonged to a young man. Black hair, bulky armor, and a longsword pointed at Zel. From his appearance, he looked like a wandering mercenary. He looked to be barely twenty, and his armor didn't quite fit him yet, giving the impression of a rookie.

"...What are you talking about...?"

"Don't play dumb! ...Listen, don't resist! Come quietly to the village!"

"If a kid tries to act tough, he's going to get hurt."

"Shut up! Just walk!"

Zel let out a small, silent sigh and began to walk. It would be easy to take the kid down—in fact, years ago, he wouldn't have hesitated. He could also just run. But both options were too much trouble.

Besides—he was getting a little interested in how this would play out.

"He's back! It's Mack!"

"Someone's with him!"

"Is that him!?"

The two were met by the buzzing of villagers as they entered the village. Normally, everyone should have been asleep, but bonfires were lit around the village, and many people were out.

"I caught him! Here he is!"

Mack, the mercenary, pointed triumphantly at Zel. The firelight illuminated Zel's face, now lacking its mask—

Oooohhhh...

The villagers gasped.

"...He... he's definitely not human..."

"So it's him...!"

"Our child..."

"—I don't know what happened here—"

At Zel's words, the gathered villagers fell into a heavy silence.

"But you've got the wrong person. I'm not involved."

"Not involved!? Don't screw with me!" Mack shouted. "It's you! It has to be you!"

"...But now that you mention it... he looks a bit different..."

"What!?" Mack glared at the villager who spoke up, silencing them. "I went into the mountain after it! And he was there! How could I be wrong!?"

...Sigh...

Zel sighed and pointed his index finger toward the sky. "Look."

The villagers looked up. They saw the bright, clear moon. Zel muttered a spell under his breath, releasing the *Words of Power*.

"Fireball."

A small, blue sphere of light shot from his finger toward the sky.

Then—

Snap.

The moment Zelgadis snapped his fingers...

BOOM!

The sphere of light burst, blooming into a flower of hellfire in the night sky.

"—As you can see—"

In the night wind carrying the echoes of the explosion, Zelgadis spoke to the frozen, speechless villagers.

"If I felt like it, I could burn this village to the ground before the moon shifts an inch. Why do you think I don't?

—The answer is simple. I have no intention of doing so."

"...I... I see! I understand it was a misunderstanding!" one of the villagers said frantically.

"Hey!" Mack started to complain, but was ignored.

"We get it! Please! Just put out the fire!"

—Put out the fire?

Zel looked up and saw that a stray spark from his blast had caught onto a house roof, which was now starting to burn.

.....

If any of his old acquaintances had been there, they wouldn't have missed the single bead of sweat on Zel's cheek...

"—Very well."

He responded in a calm tone, as if even that had been part of his plan, and chanted a spell.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Crack!

He didn't actually know any fire-extinguishing spells. He used the freezing spell to encase the burning roof in ice.

"N-Now it's ice!?"

"Don't be noisy. It's better than burning. Consider it the price for doubting a stranger."

The villagers fell silent at Zel's dismissive words. However—Mack wasn't satisfied.

"...B-But still! That doesn't prove you're not related to it! Maybe you came to the village with some other scheme!"

"...Then, you should just have me prove that I'm not."

An old man stepped out from among the villagers.

"Village Chief!?"

"...This village has recently been attacked by an unknown monster. You seem to be quite skilled. How about it? To clear the suspicion against you, could you lend us a hand in defeating it?"

—I see. So that's it— Zel thought.

That creature that attacked him in the forest—that must be what's attacking the village.

But—

"...Don't misunderstand. I don't care whether I'm suspected or not. I'm not in a hurry, but I'm not exactly bored either."

"N-No... please! Somehow...! Of course, we'll give you a proper reward if you defeat the monster..."

"Chief!" Mack protested again, only to be ignored.

Truth be told, his funds were getting a bit low, but he wasn't the type of generous person to help those who had just doubted him.

Sorry, but I refuse—

Just as he was about to say it, a sense of déjà vu struck him.

Come to think of it, something like this had happened before. He had clashed with an organization worshipping an evil god over a certain grimoire—and met a certain

assassin and a certain priestess.

In the end, all that remained from that incident was his own sense of powerlessness—

"...Very well."

Before he knew it, Zel found himself answering the Chief's request.

"I don't like you."

The following night. On the first floor of the only inn, in a corner of the tavern-turned-dining-hall, Mack sat down across from Zel without asking and made his declaration loudly.

While the other customers went silent for a moment—

"I figured as much."

Zel ignored him and continued eating his meal in silence.

—He isn't even acknowledging me.—

A flush of angry red spread across Mack’s face. Of course, it was only natural for Mack to feel resentment toward Zelgadis. Not only had he lost face by bringing the wrong person back, but the Village Chief had also declared: "You can keep the advance payment, but the final reward goes to whoever actually defeats the monster."

Since Mack had made the mistake of bringing him here, it was certainly a case of getting what he deserved, but that didn't make it any more pleasant.

"...Geez... swooping in and stealing someone else's job..."

"If you defeat that 'monster' yourself, then no one is stealing anything," Zelgadis replied. He brushed off Mack’s continued pestering without even offering a glance.

"You make it sound so easy! You don't even know how dangerous that thing is!"

"Well, it doesn't seem like something a child could handle."

"What did you say!?"

"Don't get worked up. If you don't want to lose a fight, don't pick one in the first place."

"...You... looking down on me...!"

"It's only natural to look down on you. After all—"

Zelgadis cut himself off mid-sentence.

"...After all, what?"

"Didn't you hear it?" Zelgadis rose from his seat, his hand already gripping the sword that had been leaning against the table.

"Hear what?"

"A scream."

By the time he answered, Zelgadis was already sprinting toward the door.

"Hey! Wait!" Mack scrambled after him.

Outside the tavern lay darkness and bonfires—and a distant, frantic commotion. Something had definitely happened. Mack started running as well, trailing a half-step behind Zelgadis.

Internally, Mack was impressed. To hear a distant scream amidst the noise of the tavern and in the middle of an argument... but Mack didn't let that show.

"Listen! That thing is my prey! Don't you dare interfere!"

"Then you just have to defeat it before I do. If you can't, then that's simply the extent of your skill."

"What!?" Mack fumed at Zelgadis’s retort.

"We don't have time for bickering—what's the situation!?" Zelgadis directed the last part of his sentence toward the villagers running to and fro ahead of them.

"Ti... Timothy's kid was attacked! That thing came in from the north of the village..."

"And where is it now!?"

The panicked villager regained some composure under Zelgadis's sharp command.

"...Ah... well... I don't know. But it couldn't have gone far. The watch hasn't seen it leave the village."

"...I see." Slowly, Zelgadis turned on his heel. "It certainly hasn't gone far."

He chanted a spell under his breath. "Ice Spear!"

The moment he turned, he released the spell toward the night sky! The spear of cold air flying through the void shattered in the night wind, intercepted by a streak of fire that shot toward it.

"There it is!" someone shouted.

On the roof of a house, a single black shadow stood silhouetted against the rising

moon.

"That's him!" Mack screamed. At that instant, the figure kicked off the roof and began to run.

"You people stay here!" Zelgadis shouted as he took off. There was no mistake; it was the same creature that had appeared before him in the mountains the previous night.

"...This time, I'm the one who's going to take him down!"

Zelgadis shot a glance at Mack, who was running alongside him. "I won't tell you not to follow. But if you think it's dangerous, run away without hesitation. Understood?"

"Shut up! Don't look down on me just because I'm a rookie!"

"Hoh. So you *are* a rookie."

"...!" Mack fell silent.

The monstrosity soon reached the edge of the village where the bonfires and the village watch were stationed.

"Don't interfere! You'll get hurt!" Zelgadis called out.

Whether responding to his warning or simply out of fear, the watchmen cleared a path. The creature slipped through the gap with ease and fled into the pitch-black mountains. Zelgadis and Mack followed, trampling through the grass and bushes.

Before long, Mack began to fall behind both the creature and Zelgadis.

"...W-Wait...!"

Of course, such a plea went unheeded.

"I said... wait...!"

Even as Mack spoke, the distance grew until the creature and Zelgadis completely vanished from sight.

"...Damn it...! Why...!" Mack stopped, panting heavily and swearing.

The previous night, Mack had been able to track the creature a bit longer. Mack didn't realize the reason: last night, the creature could have easily shaken Mack off, but chose not to. It had intended to lure Mack out and kill him. If Zelgadis hadn't intervened as an intruder, the creature would have carried out its plan.

"...Damn it!"

Even though Mack had lost sight of them, going back to the village alone and admitting it would mean a total loss of face. Left with no choice, Mack began to

wander aimlessly between the trees. The sound of rustling leaves in the night wind mingled with the chirping of insects. In the hazy moonlight filtering through the branches, the bushes became dark shapes, calling to mind the silhouette of the monster hidden somewhere in these mountains.

Rustle.

Mack flinched! At the slight sound of leaves, he gripped his sword and spun around, but nothing moved.

"...A rabbit or something...?" Mack muttered with a sigh of relief. He let go of the sword hilt and turned back—and the monstrosity was right in front of him.

—!?—

For a moment, his thoughts stopped. In the hazy moonlight, Mack saw the figure clearly for the first time. It had a human face. Its two eyes were wide and unnaturally large. It had no hair or eyebrows; beneath a pulpy, pale head, an unnaturally long neck connected to a bloated, distorted body like a drowned corpse. At the ends of its long arms were claws that glinted in the moonlight.

In that split second, Mack leaped backward instinctively. Simultaneously, the creature kicked off the ground.

Thud!

The impact sent Mack spinning. Though he nearly lost his balance, he managed to avoid falling over.

"Guh!"

He scrambled to face the creature that had just passed him—and then he felt it. A warm, slimy wetness on his right flank.

—I was cut!?

The moment he realized it, the pain arrived.

"...Ngh...!"

His knees shook. He could feel the blood flowing from the pulsing wound.

"Ugh... u... ah...!"

Mack’s knees buckled. The creature narrowed its eyes and let out a low groan like a growling beast, manifesting a spear of flame. Mack could no longer move.

—Death.—

The word flashed and seared itself into Mack’s mind.

Whoosh!

With the creature's roar, the spear of flame shot toward Mack!

BOOM!

At the sound of the explosion, Mack flinched. After a breath, he realized nothing had happened to him. He tentatively opened the eyes he had instinctively closed—and for the first time, he saw the white figure standing before him.

"...Y...You..."

Whether Zelgadis heard Mack’s murmur or not, he simply stood there, facing the creature. In his hand was a sword, its blade glowing with a faint red light. Of course, Mack couldn't understand that Zelgadis had swiped away the incoming spear of flame with a single magic-infused strike.

"H-Help... me... help..."

Mack lay on the ground, speaking in a thin voice. Zelgadis spared a brief glance at the fallen mercenary before returning his gaze to the monster.

"I told you. If a child tries to act tough, they'll get hurt."

"...Ugh..."

"And another thing. I don't know why you're working as a mercenary, but if you can't do this job without pretending to be a man and acting tough, then you aren't cut out for this business."

"...You... noticed...?"

Mack—Miranda Maxstar—whispered in a weak voice.

"...Hoh... so you were a woman..."

The voice didn't belong to Zelgadis, nor to Miranda.

It was the monster.

"...Y-You... can talk...!?" Miranda was the only one to cry out in shock.

"Of course. He is a human, just like me," Zelgadis answered.

The monster let out a stifled, chortling laugh. "...Yes... I was once human, just like you... Langas... that's my name... I was once a soldier in a small country... One day, the King was driven from the land, and I followed him... This is what that King did to me... he combined me with a monster... —I fled. I fled into these mountains—"

"And you've been killing villagers ever since?"

"—They called me a monster! That woman! She called me a monster!" Langas raised his voice at Zelgadis's murmur.

"A village woman! I don't know what she came there for! But she... she saw me, and she called me a monster! So I killed her! The others are the same! If they reject me, I reject their existence! It's as simple as that! You're the same, aren't you!? I know! Oh, I know! I've known since I met you in these mountains last night! You're the same! Someone turned you into that body! You're called a monster by the pathetic humans around you! You must hate it, don't you!? The world! The humans! The world itself! You understand, don't you!? We're companions! We're the same! Let them call us monsters! But we have power far greater than any human! Isn't that right!? So—let's have our revenge! Together! Against the world!"

Silence fell.

Following Langas's words—a mix of suffering, joy, and madness—Miranda simply stared at Zelgadis's back. If this man were to nod here...

"—And...?"

After a silence that felt both short and long, Zelgadis spoke with an air of complete boredom.

"That's right. First, that woman over there—"

"Don't misunderstand," Zelgadis interrupted Langas's joyful words. "Is that all you have to say? That's what I'm asking."

For a moment, Langas fell silent. "...H-Hey now... wait. what are you saying? We're companions. Let's torture that woman to death to celebrate, and then the village..."

"I told you not to misunderstand. It's true that I, too, once cursed the world just like you. —But now, I am traveling to find a way to return my body to its original human form. I have no intention of satisfying myself by taking my anger out on the world."

Those words were also a form of self-derision toward his past self. But of course, Langas was in no position to realize that.

"...Wh...at... did you say...?" The raspy voice was clearly tinged with anger.

"If you want to join forces to find a way to return to our original bodies, I wouldn't mind. In fact, it would be helpful if you did. But if you just want to vent your frustrations..."

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING!" Langas roared, cutting Zelgadis off. "There is no way for

us to return to being human! I asked! When I fled! I caught one of the mages who turned me into this! I told him to change me back! I told him to return me to a human body! But it's impossible! He was terrified, pissing himself as he told me! He said it's impossible! No one knows a way to reverse a synthesis once it's done! No one is even researching it! Do you understand!? We're stuck like this! We'll be like this for the rest of our lives!"

To Langas's fury, Zelgadis responded calmly. "And who exactly was this mage?"

"...What... do you mean?"

"I don't know who that mage was, nor do I care to know. But just because he didn't know a way to return us to normal, and didn't know anyone researching it, doesn't mean such a method doesn't exist. The hope is slim, certainly—but I have no intention of turning my back on that slim hope just to live a life hating the world."

"...I see... so you're one of them, too..." Langas ground his teeth. "Even though you're a monster like me... you reject me, too! Then fine! I shall reject you as well!"

With that, Langas dashed across the ground. The red-glowing sword in Zelgadis's hand sliced through the darkness.

Slash!

What Miranda heard—was it the sound of a footfall or a strike? Slowly, Zelgadis and Langas turned to face each other again.

"...I see... that skin isn't just for show, is it...?" Langas, whose right arm had been lightly sliced, muttered to Zelgadis with a lingering smile on his face.

In that instant they crossed, Zel's sword had caught Langas's arm, but Langas's claws had also struck Zel's upper arm. However, although his clothes were torn, there was only a hard impact; Zelgadis didn't seem to be wounded.

"Then—!" Langas chanted a spell. "Hungry Dragon Bite!"

The moment he released the *Words of Power*, something stirred.

Something blacker than the night itself writhed in the darkness. The moment it twisted its body—

Thud!

Zelgadis drove his sword into the ground right in front of him.

"What!?"

Ooooooooo...

Langas’s shock was overlaid by a scream that shouldn't have been audible to human ears.

The *Hungry Dragon Bite*—a spell that summons a shadow dragon from the astral plane into one's own shadow to devour the opponent's shadow. The owner of the devoured shadow loses the corresponding part of their own body. In the hazy moonlight, this spell was meant to bury an opponent before they could even understand what was happening.

Against an ordinary opponent, that is.

Zelgadis had used a strike from his magic-infused sword—or rather, the faint red light it emitted—to cut down the dragon that existed only within the shadow.

—Impossible!?

Instead of words of shock, Langas chanted his next spell. "Ice Arrow!"

The moment the dozen arrows of cold air began to fly through the void, Zelgadis leaped sideways, landed outside the line of fire, and charged at Langas!

"Wait—!"

Before Langas could finish his words—

THWACK.

Red blood splattered, glistening in the moonlight.

The Path Forward

The battle was over. It had ended so easily. Miranda couldn't understand everything that had happened, but she understood that Zelgadis's power was overwhelming. Langas, lying on the ground after the strike, was still barely breathing.

"—I am—" Langas whispered with labored breath. "—I am you—you are me—you have—slain yourself—"

"Yes—you are certainly exactly how I used to be," Zelgadis admitted.

If he hadn't met his former companions, he might have followed the same path as Langas. Looking up at the hazy moon, Zelgadis had that fleeting thought.

"—It's... fine... I shall die here... and be released from this body... while you... go on living... and continuing to despair—"

"I will live. But I have no intention of despairing."

Whether his words reached him or not, Langas let out a long, heavy breath—and then he never moved again. After that, Zelgadis stood alone in the falling moonlight.

"...H-Hey..."

Miranda spoke to Zelgadis in a thin voice. She had no strength left to move.

"...H... help... please..."

Zelgadis let out a small sigh, sheathed his sword, and walked over to her. His eyes, looking down at her, held a look that bordered on contempt.

"Since we're at this point, I'll be blunt."

At those words, more strength left Miranda's body. "...I'm not... going to make it, am I...?"

"—No. As I thought, you aren't cut out for this job. To be blunt, it's not that deep a wound. You're making way too much of a fuss."

".....Eh?"

And then, for the first time, Miranda realized. The look in Zel's eyes wasn't contempt—he was simply exasperated.

Several years had passed since then. Even now, Miranda sometimes thought of Zelgadis.

Was he doing well? Had he found a way to return to his human body?

And if he were to see her now, settled as the mistress of an inn—what would he say?

Miranda had a feeling that one day, that white figure would suddenly come walking through the door of her inn.

(Zelgadis: Hazy Moon Chronicles - END)

The Lords of the Forest

We were surrounded.

Naga and I realized this and stopped in our tracks while traveling along a certain mountain path.

Rustle.

The wind rattled the treetops. The number of presences hiding there... ten? twenty?

—This is bad! I thought to myself. It didn't matter who was surrounding us. The problem was Naga's personality. At this rate, she'd likely fire off an indiscriminate attack spell that would blow us up along with them.

—In that case—!

"Naga, look out!"

WHACK!

"Buphe."

The log I swung—about as thick as a grown man's arm—hit Naga square in the head, sending her rolling about two and a half times.

...Phew... and while she's down—

"What do you want?" I called out to whoever was surrounding us.

The answer was—nothing. Only a freezing silence.

"You really think you're hidden? Do you even know the word 'presence'? ...If you think I'm bluffing, keep hiding. I'll blast you with an attack spell in a second."

At my second call—

"—W-Wait! It was a mistake!" came a man's voice, slightly cracking.

"A mistake?"

"Yeah—we... we mistook you for another group. Let us explain. I'm coming out now... so... could you put down that log...?"

"Fine, then." I tossed aside the log I was holding in my right hand.

The voice continued. "Also! Could you stop picking up that rock instead!?"

Hmph. He’s quite demanding. Reluctantly, I tossed aside the fist-sized rock I had picked up.

"...I'm coming over. Please don't do anything violent."

He said something rather rude—and eventually, a man in his late twenties emerged from the bushes and the depths of the trees.

He had short-cropped brown hair. If it weren't for the matching goatee, he’d be considered handsome. His build was a bit lean, but he wasn't skinny; he was supple and toned. He wore leather armor on his chest and a bow and arrows on his back. For someone who might be a thug or a bandit, his appearance was quite neat, and his beard was well-groomed.

He looked like a hunter... but he had far too many companions for that.

For some reason, his face twitched slightly as he approached with his hands up, stopping about ten paces away. In a somewhat affected tone, he spoke.

"My apologies. We are currently searching for some scoundrels who are ravaging this mountain. We heard voices and assumed it was them... but it seems we jumped to conclusions. I'm sorry for startling you."

"—In that case, can we go now?"

I asked, but he didn't answer. Instead, he said, "...Earlier... you said you'd use an attack spell if we didn't come out... I take it you're traveling mages?"

"Yeah, so...?"

"Then—I know this is a bit selfish, but... would you be willing to lend us your strength? We're dealing with a rather troublesome bunch... Of course, we'll provide a suitable reward."

...Sigh...

I let out a small sigh. Even if it was a mistake, they surround us out of nowhere and then ask for help because they'll pay? It was a selfish request indeed.

Just as I was about to say so, out of the corner of my eye—a black object stirred.

Yes. The Naga I had just knocked out was coming back to life!

Naturally, if I let her be, she'd complain to me and then launch into our usual ritual of trading attack spells—which is a pain.

So, I spoke loudly enough for the reviving Naga to hear.

"So, you're saying there's money in it."

The black mass shivered slightly—and in the next instant, she was standing tall beside me, her chest puffed out, without even leaving an afterimage.

"Hoh! I'd like to hear more about that!"

"Whoa!?" The man flinched and stepped back at Naga's sudden movement.

Hmph. He clearly hasn't had enough life experience.

...Well... it's not like I enjoy having this much "life experience" either...

"Oh, don't mind her. Go on."

"...Ah... right..."

Prompted by me, he continued. "I haven't introduced myself yet... I am Josh Lindberg. I serve Lord Arantize and work for the guard."

"....."

...Lord Arantize... and a Ranger...? I feel like I've heard those names somewhere recently...

Naga seemed to feel the same way, standing beside me with a subtly annoyed look on her face. A Ranger is someone whose job is to protect the mountains and forests owned by the country or a Lord from poachers and the like.

Anyway, Josh continued.

"A while ago, a man who was a Ranger like us was stripped of his position. It was because he was found to be embezzling funds. Having lost his job, that man—likely out of revenge—began to ravage the mountains and forests around here with his family."

"...With his family..." Naga and I groaned in unison.

"Yes. However, this man's skill as a Ranger is top-tier. He reads our every move and manages to outwit us. That's why I'd like to borrow the strength of someone with a different perspective... in other words, you two."

"...Um... by the way, what are the names of this man and his family...?"

"The man is Blood Crescendo. His children's names are... I believe the daughter is Camilla and the son is Terious."

"....."

...Ah... I knew it.

Without saying a word, Naga and I looked at each other.

A while ago—Naga and I were caught up in a feud between Camilla and Terious over which of them would succeed their father. In the end, before it could be settled, the old man was fired for embezzlement, and the whole thing fizzled out...

Who would have thought the whole family would be out here ravaging the mountains...

"What do you say? Will you lend us your strength?"

"Hoh. That depends on the amount of the reward," Naga said.

"...Wait...!? You're actually going to take this job, Naga?" I whispered.

Naga whispered back, "I don't care about the other two, but I wanted to blow that Camilla away at least twenty or thirty more times."

I see. That makes sense.

Camilla was the girl who had led Naga and me around by the nose with her lies. I had eventually sided with her brother, Terious, and even got a reward, but Naga, who was completely fooled by Camilla, probably didn't get a single copper.

I was also in favor of blowing Camilla away until she either repented or stopped moving.

The problem was how much time and effort it would take to find and defeat them. And whether the reward would be worth it.

Josh thought for a moment under our gaze. "...Well... for a success reward..."

Perhaps he didn't want his companions hiding nearby to hear, so he whispered the reward amount into our ears.

—Hmm.

The amount he proposed wasn't bad.

But then, a question occurred to me.

"...I have to ask... where is that money coming from?" I whispered back. "I don't think the Lord who ordered the hunt would pay that much..."

In cases like this, you have to be clear about the source of the money, or you might end up with them saying, "I thought I'd be able to get it, but I couldn't."

Josh answered simply, "That's coming out of my own pocket, of course."

"Do Rangers around here really make that much?" Naga asked suspiciously.

After all, Naga and I had been fooled by Camilla's "tempting offers" before. We were naturally on guard.

But Josh said with a smile, "No. It's a painful expense for me as well. But I said it was a 'success reward.' If my other companions catch them, I only pay a modest amount for expenses. But if *you* catch them, you get the reward, and I get the credit. Credit leads to evaluations, which lead to future promotions! Naturally, the allowance from the Lord will increase! Just imagining the looks of envy and jealousy from my colleagues when I gain trust, status, and fame—ah, I can't wait!"

"...Um..."

"Ah. No. My apologies." Josh regained his composure. "So—what do you say? Will you take this request?"

I felt a bit uneasy about his personality... but knowing that Camilla and the others were out there doing as they pleased, I couldn't exactly act like I hadn't heard.

In the end, Naga and I both nodded our heads.

"—This area is where they were most recently spotted."

Josh stopped after we had been walking through the trackless mountains for quite some time.

"A fellow Ranger discovered them. On that slope over there—" He pointed to a slope that was almost a cliff. "He said he saw a red-haired woman running up it. It's likely Blood's daughter, Camilla. He called out to her, but she ignored him and fled. He tried to give chase, but she got away. If she crossed here— ...Are you two all right?"

He spoke in an annoyingly cool voice to Naga and me, who were both out of breath.

"...I'm... not... all right..."

"Ngh... if possible... can we walk... where there's a path..."

"What are you saying? If we took a detour like that, it would take us days to get there," Josh said without even sounding winded.

Naga and I are travelers. We're used to walking mountain paths. But walking endlessly through places that weren't even game trails was honestly exhausting.

And we were keeping up with Josh, who was a Ranger.

At one point, I tried to follow from above using a flying spell, but he stopped me.

"If we happen to run into them while you're floating above, they'll notice us first and hide," he had said.

By the way, only Naga, Josh, and I were here. Josh's Ranger companions who had surrounded us earlier had scattered to search. It was indeed nonsense for a large group to move together for a wide-area search.

They apparently had a system where they would blow a whistle that sounded like a certain animal to call their companions if something happened.

"So, did you notice anything? No? I see. Then let's move to the next sighting—"

"Wait, wait, wait." I hurriedly stopped him as he was about to turn on his heel.

"What's wrong? If we don't hurry, the others will beat us to it," Josh said with a dissatisfied look.

...Geez. He’s a real slave-driver.

I caught my breath. "...I can't... understand everything... just from a quick glance... Besides... let us rest a bit... and... slow down the pace..."

"Hey now. What are you saying?" Josh let out a bitter smile. "Moving at a high pace through trackless paths! I'm used to it because I'm a Ranger, so I'm fine, but it's quite tough for an ordinary person! To have you panting and puffing and yet somehow keeping up, and then responding with a cool face when you're sweating and asking to 'rest a bit'! This is exactly it! The supreme moment where I can confirm my own absolute superiority! If I walked slowly, I wouldn't be able to enjoy that feeling!"

"...You don't need to 'enjoy' that," I deadpanned.

This was no good. If I kept letting this guy lead us, he’d just waste our energy for nothing. For now, I should talk to buy time and wait for my strength to return.

I looked around. "...You said they're ravaging the mountains as a family... by the way, how exactly are they 'ravaging' them?"

"Hunting rabbits and things like that."

"...Rab..."

"And birds too!"

"...Wait... wait a minute." Naga chimed in from the side. "You mean all they're doing is hunting a few animals!?"

"That's right," Josh answered as if it were obvious.

...Sigh...

Naga and I dropped our shoulders and sighed. "...Well... I feel like... there's no real problem with just leaving them be..."

"What are you saying!?" Josh’s eyebrows shot up at my perfectly reasonable opinion. "The issue isn't the scale of the damage. A scoundrel who embezzled public funds emerged from our ranks of Rangers. And that person is ravaging the mountains around here with his family. *That* is the problem! Furthermore, if we can't catch that scoundrel! If word gets around that 'the Rangers in that territory are no good,' it would be a shame not only for us but for the Lord as well!"

I see. It wasn't about physical damage; it was a matter of honor.

"Besides!" Whether he was getting into it or just being desperate, he continued with momentum. "If I can catch them—who were said to be top-tier—there's no doubt my evaluation will skyrocket! Just imagining catching and tying up that arrogant Blood and looking down on him as he rolls at my feet! Just imagining it! Ah, I can't take it!"

"...Um..."

"Anyway, let's keep moving."

"I said, wait!" I stopped him again as he tried to turn.

Honesty with a guy like this was just exhausting. I chose my words carefully.

"You hired us because you wanted our perspective, which is different from yours. Right?"

"That's right."

"In that case, it’s no use dragging me around to the same crime scenes, showing me the same things you've already seen, and asking for my opinion. If you want my take on it: you could visit every single sighting location a hundred times and you’d still never find them. You have to look at this from a more... global perspective."

"I see... global, is it?" Josh replied, falling right into my trap.

Yes!

Maintaining a dead serious expression, I continued. "Just wandering aimlessly through the mountains won't work. What you need is to organize your information—accurate situational awareness and analysis. For starters, let's head to the nearest town or village and get a map..."

"I already have a map."

"**YOU HAVE ONE!?**" Naga and I shouted in unison.

"...I mean... if you had one..."

"...I wish you’d... said so from the start..."

"If you wanted to see a map, you should have just said so," Josh said. He reached into his tunic, rummaged around, and pulled out a map, spreading it open for us.

The map had boundary lines drawn on it—likely marking the territory—and several 'X' marks scattered about, presumably where they'd been spotted. But...

"...Um, excuse me, Mr. Josh?"

"Yes?"

"Looking at this map... it feels like the territory around here is absolutely massive..."

"It is. And?" Josh answered nonchalantly.

I didn't know how accurate the map was, but it was huge. Excessively huge. It depicted several soaring mountain ranges, valleys, rivers, and lakes. The village we left this morning and the one from the day before were both within its borders. And those 'X' marks were dotted here and there across the expanse.

Josh pointed to one of the marks with his right hand. "This is our current location. And—" He traced a large circle with his fingertip that encompassed almost the entire map. "—this is our search area."

"....."

Naga and I stood there, ghastly and speechless.

I didn't know how many companions Josh had in total, but trying to find just three people in a place this ridiculously vast was bordering on impossible.

...Man... I know I accepted the job, but I'm really starting to wish I could back out...

Still, I didn't want to say that out loud and risk him demanding a cancellation fee.

...Urgh... in that case, I'll just have to slack off and drag things out!

"...Hmm... I see..." I muttered, resting my chin in my hand.

"Did you figure something out, Miss Lina!?"

"What about charcoal burners' huts or caves that aren't on the map...?"

"We're searching those, of course," Josh interrupted.

"I'm sure you are," I shot back. "That's exactly why I'm saying you won't find them."

"...Eh?" His eyes went wide.

"Which is the closest, relatively large town on this map?"

He pointed to a spot. "That would be... probably the town of Kubic... —Wait, surely

you don't mean!?"

"Exactly." I gave a firm nod. "To a top-tier Ranger, the forests and mountains are like their own backyard. Therefore, everyone assumes they must be using those skills to hide out there. That's precisely why they'd use a place that *isn't* the forest as their base. ...Of course, I haven't decided for sure that they're in that town... but it's worth investigating, isn't it?"

Meeting my serious gaze, Josh fell for it hook, line, and sinker, nodding in agreement.

Kubic.

The town nestled in the mountains wasn't particularly large, but because it faced a fairly major highway, it was reasonably bustling. On this afternoon, the streets were lined with scattered stalls, filled with couples, old ladies inspecting fruit, a trio I'd seen somewhere before, and children running around playfully.

We arrived in town just as the afternoon sun—

.....wait.....

A trio I'd seen somewhere before?

"**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!?**"

I couldn't help but shout at the top of my lungs, pointing a finger directly at them.

There was a burly, muscular man, a red-haired woman in her twenties, and a middle-aged man with black-and-white hair and a beard. They were wearing ordinary clothes—no leather armor, no bows—but I recognized those faces instantly.

Startled by my voice, the three of them looked our way.

"—How did you find us here!?" the red-haired woman—Camilla—shouted.

Ugh, they're actually here!

My plan to head to town on a whim, spend Josh's money on a "search," and lazily relax was instantly ruined!

I mean, don't just hang around near the entrance of the town! You guys! Even if you were going to be found, I wanted it to happen *after* I'd had a chance to rest! I couldn't say that in front of Josh, though!

Regaining my composure, I flicked my cloak. "I found you! It was exactly as I read it!"

"...For someone who 'read' it, you seemed awfully surprised..."

"I just didn't expect to run into you so suddenly!" I threw a follow-up comment back at

Josh, who was muttering behind me.

"Josh! And you two from back then!" the middle-aged man with the salt-and-pepper hair—Blood Crescendo—cried out.

"...Eh...? You know them?" Josh asked us, but we didn't have time for a long explanation.

"Explanations later! More importantly—!"

"R-Right!" Josh stepped forward forcefully. "Blood Crescendo! And your children, Camilla and Terious!" He raised his voice regally toward the three of them. "You three are under arrest for crimes within the mountain forests owned by Lord Aranti—wait, they ran!"

Before he could even finish his speech, the three of them had spun on their heels and bolted! Well, of course they did; only an idiot stays put while someone's giving a formal proclamation. To make matters worse, they didn't run in the same direction—each of them took off a different way.

"—Darn it!" Josh looked around frantically, unsure of who to chase.

Good grief!

"Josh, you go after Blood! Naga, get Camilla! I'll take the last one!"

"R-Right!"

"Ohoho! Leave it to me!"

The two of them dashed off. I took off after the remaining one—Terious.

...Actually, I'd picked the easiest role for myself. But hey, Josh has a rivalry with Blood, and Naga was once tricked into working for free by Camilla. This is my ultimate strategy: pit people with grudges against each other so I can take it easy!

I sprinted through the street, chasing after Terious's back. I'm somewhat confident in my speed, but since he'd been trained in the mountains and fields, the gap between us was slowly widening. However...

"Is this really okay, Terious!?"

Once I judged we were far enough away from Josh and Naga, I called out to him. As I expected, he hesitated and came to a halt. I slowed my pace as well.

"I don't know what your father or Camilla told you. But you know, don't you? You aren't allowed to hunt in the Lord's mountains. ...I know you care about your family. But... no, that's exactly why. If your family members are trying to do something wrong, isn't

it the job of a real family to stop them instead of just going along with it?"

"...!"

Terious turned around slowly, his shoulders shaking. His face was filled with regret. Despite his rugged, thug-like appearance, he was honest—or rather, simple-minded. To put it bluntly, he was someone easily swayed by a few choice words. He'd probably been talked into this by Camilla's silver tongue again.

"...I... I..."

"It's not too late. So... lend me your strength. To stop the two of them."

"...I understand..."

Convinced by my words, Terious gave a solemn nod.

"You... you convinced him!?" Josh cried out in shock.

I had returned to our meeting spot with Terious and waited. When Josh eventually trudged back alone, I explained that I'd successfully persuaded Terious to cooperate. This was his reaction.

He clutched his head, trembling. "No, no, no, this is impossible! Even I was only one step—no, half a step—away from catching Blood before he escaped, and yet this girl managed to not just capture, but *persuade* his son—even if his skills are inferior to Blood's—to cooperate!? What does this do to my reputation... no, wait. Come to think of it, I'm the one who hired Lina and promised to pay her, so Lina's credit is my credit! Which means I am the one who single-handedly won over a member of the Crescendo family that my colleagues couldn't catch! Hahaha! You may worship me if you like, Lina."

"I will not." I deadpanned.

Well, I suppose it's better that he reached his own conclusion and recovered, rather than moping and muttering next to me forever.

"Now then, Master Terious." Josh ignored my retort and turned to the boy. "Can you tell us your family's—no, Blood's—actual goal? I know it's revenge against Lord Arantize for firing him, but what specifically does he plan to do?"

"N-No, that's wrong!" Terious looked surprised. "Father—it's true he committed misconduct and lost his job. But... he always said that he only did those things because it was the only way to support me and my sister in our struggling lives... He always said that while sipping brandy on an Ermekian leather sofa..."

"Um. He was definitely lying to you."

"Actually, I was starting to suspect that myself."

Starting to?

He continued. "...Father said he was ashamed of his dismissal and wanted to make amends for his actions by protecting the Lord's forests for no reward. He asked us to help him. That’s why I promised to cooperate."

"Then why did you run?"

"Father told me: 'Amends are not made to be praised or recognized by others. They are only meaningful when done in secret. Therefore, if anyone sees you or calls out to you, run. Use all your strength to escape. If necessary, you can even kill witnesses. If we get separated, meet up at the hideout later. Hunting prey for food while patrolling the mountains is in accordance with the laws of nature and necessary to continue this atonement. It’s even better to gather enough for the whole family, and be sure to get any prey or plants that can be sold for a high price.' ...But I felt like something was wrong..."

Everything is wrong with that man.

"Just now, when Miss Lina asked me 'Is this really okay?'... it made me want to make sure. I want to know what is right and what is wrong."

The lines he was saying sounded cool, but as usual, he was just being totally deceived.

I let out a small sigh. "—Well, anyway, that’s all you’ve heard, then."

"That’s all... well, yes, that’s it." Terious nodded, not quite understanding.

Josh crossed his arms with a troubled expression. "So we still don't know the real goal, huh? Well, for now, the priority is to apprehend the other two, Blood and Camilla. So, Master Terious, could you tell us where you were supposed to meet if you got separated?"

"Yes. I’ll lead the way. Over here—"

As he started to walk, Josh stopped him with a gesture. "No. Let's wait to be guided until Naga returns."

"You're right. ...Naga-san went after my sister, didn't she? I hope she hasn't been talked into something by her silver tongue like last time. Hahahaha."

Freeze!

Terious's joke, which wasn't funny at all, made me freeze in place.

...It’s possible... it’s extremely possible...

"Hahahaha. Surely not," Josh laughed it off airily.

However, anxiety began to spread through my chest. ...Mind you, Camilla shouldn't have anything to win Naga over with right now...

.....no.

"She *does*!"

"Wh—"

"What's wrong, Miss Lina...?"

"Terious! Lead us to the meeting spot right now!"

"Ah... but Naga-sa..."

"Just do it, hurry! This is a race against time! You too, Josh!"

"I... I don't mind, but..."

"Then let's go, hurry, go!"

Pressed by my intensity, Terious nodded and started walking.

But—by the time we arrived, it was too late. Blood and Camilla were nowhere to be seen at the meeting spot.

In the inn room that was supposed to be the family's base, Blood and Camilla were gone, and their luggage had already been cleared out.

"—This is bad—" I muttered, looking around the empty room where only Terious's bags remained.

"Bad, how?"

"I think I’ve figured out what their real goal is," I answered Josh.

"Real goal?" Terious asked this time.

"Yes." I turned to Josh. "I first met Terious and his sister Camilla when they were fighting over who would succeed their father. In the end, it fizzled out because Blood was fired—"

I paused and glanced around. It was a small inn on the edge of town. Empty corridors, closed doors. Even the one open door in front of us led to an empty room. Once I was sure no one was around, I lowered my voice.

"...When Camilla was trying to win me over at first, she told me something. She said

she’d tell me the location of an **Orihalcon** vein."

"Ori—!" Josh nearly shouted, but he choked it back just in time.

Orihalcon. A rare metal that trades for many times the price of gold. Naturally, anyone would want to get their hands on it.

I continued. "At the time, Terious told me it was actually an Orihalcon vein owned by the Lord... but if Blood and Camilla are after that vein, there’s a high probability they used that as bait to bring Naga over to their side."

"B-But then, it’s just the three of them losing one member and gaining another..."

"That’s where you're wrong," I said, refuting Josh's pale-faced opinion. "Orihalcon is highly resistant to magical interference. But if a mage uses a tunnel-digging spell like *Earth Spirit Path* on a location where it exists... presto! The dirt and stone vanish, and only the Orihalcon fragments are left behind. In other words—now that they have Naga on their side, they're ready to start their Orihalcon mining heist whenever they want!"

"What!? That’s terrible!" Josh finally understood the gravity of the situation and shouted, his face turning white.

"It's very bad! So, Terious! To prevent that, can you hurry and lead us to that Orihalcon vein!?"

"...No... I don't actually know... where it is..."

"—Eh? But...?"

"Father knew the location. My sister might have researched it, too. But all I know is that there's a vein somewhere in the territory..."

"I know where it is!" Josh declared firmly. "I shall lead you. To that very spot!"

As far as the eye could see, there were only gentle ridges in every direction. I knew we were in the middle of the mountains, but in this pathless place, I had no idea where I was. This deep mountain location was where the Orihalcon vein owned by Lord Arantize was located.

...Not that we were taken to the actual mining site. We were taken to a place that looked like nothing, and Josh pointed to a mountain and said it was that one.

"Needless to say, the location of the mine, let alone the quarry, is a secret," Josh said.

Well, obviously. If word got out about an Orihalcon vein—even just the fact that one existed—it would attract bandits and thugs, and depending on the size of the vein, it could even start a war with another Lord or country.

"Given the circumstances, I've led you to the mountain. But I cannot show you the exact quarry."

"I know. And I know I shouldn't tell anyone about this. Let's just say the request fee includes a 'hush money' bonus." I gave him a wink. "They probably don't intend to march straight into the quarry anyway. ...When Blood started ravaging the mountains, you considered the possibility that he was after the Orihalcon, didn't you? Naturally, you've stationed soldiers and Rangers at the quarry. Blood and the others must have predicted that. The reason you didn't tell us about this was because you didn't want us to know the mine existed. ...I guess you didn't think we already knew."

"...Exactly," Josh said with a shrug.

"Then, even if Blood has Naga on his side, I don't think they'll try a forced frontal breakthrough. They'll likely try to dig toward the vein from a place where the guards at the quarry can't see them... but not too far away from the vein itself. Do you know of any places like that?"

"...In that case... perhaps around there."

"You do know a place, then?"

"Yes. Follow me."

Josh began walking without a word of explanation. Naturally, Terious and I followed without asking questions. If he described the location, we might be able to work backward and figure out the exact coordinates of the Orihalcon quarry. He was clearly being cautious.

We climbed slopes, wove through trees, passed through a short cave, crossed a stream, and wove through more trees until I started to lose track of where we were.

"We're here," Josh said, finally coming to a halt.

Before us stood a cliff covered in ivy, perhaps a bit taller than a man. In one corner, a vertical crack formed a tiny ravine, looking like a narrow alleyway.

"Deep inside there is—"

Josh began to point, but he was cut short.

Thwack!

"Gugh!?"

Terious suddenly kicked Josh aside!

Caught off guard, Josh tumbled to the ground. Even as he scrambled to pick himself up, he snarled, "Y-you...!"

"No! Josh!" I shouted, pointing upward.

Josh followed my gaze. Trees grew thick above and below the cliff, obscuring the view. Emerging from the shadows of the canopy above was a middle-aged man equipped with leather armor and a bow.

"—Blood!"

Josh cried out, finally realizing what had happened.

He looked at the spot where he had been standing a moment ago; a single arrow was buried deep in the trunk of a tree just behind it. Yes—Blood had completely erased his presence and loosed an arrow that even I hadn't noticed. Only Terious had sensed it and kicked the intended target—Josh—out of harm's way.

"Terious. What is the meaning of this?"

Looking down from his high vantage point, Blood questioned his son in a deep, heavy voice. "Atonement is to be done in secret, without being noticed. That is what I told you. And yet... why are you standing there with those people!?"

Terious flinched at the roar, which sounded like a lion's growl, but he still lifted his head. "...I... I want to ask you, Father! These people—" He gestured toward Josh and me. "—these people said that you and Sister are after the Orihalcon here! Is it true!?"

"Nothing more than baseless speculation," Blood replied instantly. "It just so happens that I reunited with Lady Naga, who just so happens to be casting spells in the mountains, which just so happens to leave behind Orihalcon. We, who just so happen to be present, decided we couldn't leave it there for fear of making the mine's existence public. We simply plan to collect it for the sake of secrecy. That is all!"

"...Oh... so that’s how it was."

"**DON'T BELIEVE THAT!**"

Bam! Thud!

The kicks Josh and I delivered simultaneously struck Terious right in the spine. I pointed a finger sharply at Blood atop the cliff.

"As if there are that many 'happens-tos'! No one but Terious would fall for an excuse that pathetic!"

"...Hmm... to be honest, even for my own son, I was starting to wonder about him myself," Blood muttered.

"I think you’re a 'wonder' of a parent yourself," I shot back.

"In other words, a magnificent bad example!" Josh added.

"No, don't act proud of it. ...Man, I think I finally understand why Camilla turned out the way she did. Anyway! Your ambitions end here!"

"That's right! Give it up, Blood!" Josh stepped forward. "If you surrender quietly, apologize through your tears, lick my boots, and say 'I'm no match for the great Josh-sama,' then I might forgive you! I can't speak for what the others will do, though!"

"Why are you provoking him!?" I yelled.

"It’s not a provocation! It’s my sincere wish!" Josh asserted.

Good grief.

"I think not," came Blood's predictable answer.

"I see. In that case!" Josh reached into his tunic. I assumed he was going to blow a whistle to signal his comrades.

But...

"Is that wise? Calling your friends?" Blood scoffed. As a former Ranger, he knew exactly what Josh was up to. "Josh, regardless of the reason, you revealed the location of a top-secret mine to this brat who has no connection to the territory. Your comrades will find out. Even if you make an arrest, that blunder might cancel out your achievement, don't you think?"

"Ugh...!?" Josh’s hand stopped.

"Conversely, if you can capture us without involving your peers, the credit will be yours alone. It would certainly lead to a promotion."

...Tch...! This old guy knows exactly which buttons to push. For Josh, whose "lame dream" was to get promoted and look down on everyone else, this was a critical hit.

Seeing Josh frozen, Blood turned his attention to me. "—And you, Lina, was it? What about you? Now that you know the location of the mine... the Rangers might detain and imprison you. At worst, they might 'silence' you to keep the secret. Now. What will you do?"

He had a point. It wasn't an impossible scenario.

Josh let out a long, thin sigh and pulled his empty hand from his tunic. "...Calling for backup will be the last resort."

"...I guess we have no choice... we'll settle this ourselves!" I agreed.

"Try it if you can!"

With a roar, Blood notched an arrow and loosed it in one fluid, wasted motion. His target was me. Either he thought taking me down would end it, or he thought I was the easiest target. Regardless, I wasn't about to be hit!

I dashed sideways as the arrow flew. The first one was easy to dodge. But Blood didn't miss a beat, notching and firing a second arrow immediately. He was fast! The arrow hissed past me, the sound of cloven wind ringing in my ears. Josh finally notched an arrow and fired at Blood, but Blood dodged it with effortless grace.

"Stop it, Fatheeeeeeeeer!"

Terious shouted, notching an arrow and aiming at Blood—

Twang.

The arrow flew off into the blue yonder.

Oh, right. I forgot he mentioned he was terrible under pressure.

I guess I'm the only one who can get things done! I loosed a spell at Blood.

"**Lighting Arrow!**"

A dozen or more shafts of light and ice streaked toward him. In an open area, most opponents would find them impossible to dodge. But Blood simply stepped back, using the trees as cover to let the spell whistle past. The ice only served to freeze the surrounding grass and wood uselessly.

"Is that all?" Blood taunted from his hiding spot.

Fine. I'll show him another trick.

"Not bad. Is this the power of a father's love for his daughter?" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "You're acting as a decoy to draw us in while Camilla and Naga dig up the Orihalcon... You must really trust her. It's not like Camilla and Naga would ever feel the heat, grab the Orihalcon, and bail on you, right? You have to believe that to pull this off."

"...Ugh...!" A small groan came from the thicket.

Of course—Camilla and Naga would absolutely do that. Blood knew it too. I was fanning the seeds of doubt in his heart. My ultimate "Silver Tongue" attack!

Then, Blood's presence vanished.

I waited for a moment, but he didn't reappear or attack. I couldn't even sense him anymore.

"Did he run? Or is he hiding his presence and waiting in ambush?" Josh muttered.

"I can't tell either," Terious added.

"Then we have to go in," I said. Our goal was to stop them; there was no point in waiting for them to move.

"Going through there is too dangerous..." Josh said, looking at the crack in the cliff. It was too narrow for two people to walk side-by-side. If we were attacked from the front or above, we'd be sitting ducks.

"But the top..." Terious looked at the greenery above. "We don't know where Father or Sister might have set traps."

"No... they didn't have time for that," Josh argued.

"They had plenty of time," I countered. "They've been coming in and out of these mountains frequently, right? If they were targeting the Orihalcon from the start, they would have trapped the perimeter long ago—just for a moment like this."

"So... traps wait for us whether we take the ravine or the cliff top," Josh muttered bitterly.

"Exactly. But those are traps designed with a *Ranger's* logic in mind. They didn't account for a sorcerer's logic."

"? What do you mean?"

"This is what I mean!"

I chanted a spell and slammed my hand against the ground.

"**Beast Master!**"

The earth churned and rose, taking the shape of a massive humanoid twice the height of an adult. A low rumble echoed—the grinding of soil or perhaps a birth-cry. With a wedge-shaped torso and unnaturally large hands, it was a Golem crafted from earth and stone through the intervention of earth spirits.

"We're riding this through the ravine. It'll act as a shield against traps and arrows. ...Golem! Crouch!"

With a sound between a groan and a creak, the Golem stooped. I climbed onto its head, Terious took the right shoulder, and Josh took the left. It was a bit cramped with three people, but it couldn't be helped.

"Golem!" I pointed toward the ravine. "Use your hands as a shield for us and move into that valley!"

The Golem responded with a groan and began to stomp forward, covering us with its massive hands. The ravine was just wide enough for it to pass; soil crumbled from the walls as it scraped by.

Suddenly—*Thump!*

Both sides of the cliff collapsed, burying the Golem up to its waist. It was a person-sized trap set by Blood. Anyone walking there would have been buried alive. But the Golem didn't care; it used its sheer strength to crush the debris and continued its steady pace.

"Whoaaaaaa!" Terious and Josh cried out in admiration.

The Golem advanced with overwhelming power. Blood and Camilla were first-rate—maybe even world-class—Rangers. If I fought them on their home turf, I'd probably lose. So—I simply wouldn't fight them on their turf. It was that simple.

The Golem's hands were large enough to hide us completely, and its body made human-oriented traps meaningless. No matter how genius a marksman Blood was, he couldn't destroy a Golem with normal arrows. That meant only one person on their side could stop this Golem...

All right. It's about time.

I gave instructions to Terious, Josh, and the Golem.

"**Vibration Blast!**"

K-boom!

The offensive spell struck the Golem's chest, shattering its upper body.

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga's obnoxious laughter pierced through the aftermath of the explosion. "You thought you could use a Golem to guard against traps and arrows, but you were naive to forget the presence of me, Naga the White Serpent! Lina Inverse!"

The remaining lower half of the Golem crumbled.

In that instant—

"**Lighting Arrow!**"

Crack-shatter-freeze!

"Ebh."

My ice arrows pierced through the dust. Naga’s strange groan told me the attack had landed. I knew Naga was there, so obviously we weren't going to stay on the Golem’s head forever. We had the Golem use its hands as cover for two reasons: to protect us from arrows, and to make us invisible to the enemy.

I knew they’d send Naga out once they saw the Golem. So, the three of us had jumped off midway and followed a short distance behind. If there were traps, the Golem would trigger them safely for us. We only stayed on its head initially because Blood might have been watching.

Naga, assuming we were where the hands were shielding, blasted a Golem that was essentially empty. We, walking safely behind, were unharmed. I simply waited for the moment Naga was gloating to release my freezing spell.

As the dust cleared, the frozen figure of Naga appeared behind the pile of dirt that used to be the Golem. And beyond her, I could see the retreating backs of Blood and Camilla.

"I won't let you get away!"

Josh loosed an arrow. In this narrow ravine, dodging was nearly impossible! But just before the arrow reached them, Blood and Camilla vanished!

"What!?" Josh cried.

We rushed to the spot and found a hole yawning in the cliff face. It was likely a tunnel Naga had dug to reach the Orihalcon. The opening was black, and I couldn't tell how deep it went. The two of them had already disappeared into the darkness.

Just as I peered inside, I jerked back.

Whizz!

An arrow hissed past my face, cutting through the empty air.

"Come in if you want," Camilla’s muffled voice echoed from the depths. "We'll just pick you off one by one."

She was right. Walking blindly into a single-path tunnel like that was asking to be shot.

...If we walked in blindly, that is.

I spoke loudly, making sure they could hear me. "Okay, let's just bury them. Let's collapse the hole."

"Wait! Wait a minute! No doing that!"

"A-are you a coward, girl!? Do you wish to be known as a dishonorable cheat!?"

The panicked voices of Camilla and Blood rang out. I answered coolly.

"I'm fine with being a cheat."

"Wait, just wait!"

Camilla's voice echoed—they were likely consulting each other. After a brief silence, Blood spoke.

"Hmph. Little girl, we admit defeat this time. We shall leave this land."

"No, I still want to bury the hole."

"Fine, fine! We'll surrender quietly, alright!?"

They should have just said so from the start.

"Alright, Terious is going to throw a rope in. Tie your bows to it first. Once we've collected those, next—"

I started to say, but then my whole body went rigid. I had forgotten.

I had forgotten how fast *she* recovers.

I spun around—but at that exact moment...

KA-BOOM.

Naga's fury-fueled spell changed the very shape of the mountain.

"I mean, seriously, it's your fault for falling for Camilla's silver tongue so easily!" I yelled.

"I couldn't help it! If someone tells me 'this is a different location from the Lord's Orihalcon quarry,' anyone would believe them!" Naga shouted back.

"**Don't believe them!**"

Naga and I were stomping down the mountain path.

In the end, after that explosion, the Rangers came swarming the place, and Naga and I had to make a run for it. I don't know what happened to the others. Blood and Camilla were likely caught, and Terious probably got off with a light warning, but I wasn't about to go back and check.

After all, we'd slightly altered the shape of an Orihalcon mountain. If we went back, we'd definitely be arrested. And since there was no way Josh was going to pay the reward in this situation, going back was all risk and no reward.

Basically, I worked for free. Again. Ugh.

"Anyway, Naga, let's just get out of this territory—"

I stopped mid-sentence. We were surrounded.

Rustle...

The wind whistled through the treetops. I sensed ten... no, twenty presences. Had the Rangers caught up already? Or was it just bandits?

.....well, whatever.

"**Fireball!**"

"**Windy Shield!**"

K-boom! Zap! Kablooey!

Our spells drowned out the screams, blowing away whoever those people were.

"Alright, Naga. For a while, if we get surrounded, let's just start by blowing everyone away with spells."

"Hmph. Sounds good."

With that, we hurried down the mountain path.

(The Lords of the Forest: The End)

Afterword:

Author (Kanzaka): Long time no see, everyone! And so, here is *Slayers Special Volume 18: Inheritance Feud - Forest Rangers*!

Lina: Yeah, yeah. Whatever.

Author: So cold! I was hoping for a bit more excitement here. I mean, we've got new movies and everything coming up.

Lina: What are you talking about!? You're the one starting new series and writing Zelgadiss side stories while leaving my main stories hanging! Like that one I teased in the last afterword, *Showdown! Lina vs. the Viperfish*—just the title alone gets the blood pumping!

Author: Well... for that title, I could only think of a story where you keep buying bottled drinks because you want the Viperfish bottle cap, but no matter how many you drink, you never get it.

Lina: Don't write that. But seriously, Author, haven't you been obsessed with mini-figures lately? You have so many 'Inugami' (Note 1) from that one mystery series that you could start a breeding program.

Author: Don't talk about the duplicates! I've always had terrible luck with random draws! ...But man, the quality of those things lately is amazing. And they've been making more 'strange' things like yokai and monsters!

Lina: Oh, Author is weak for that stuff. The only reason he writes this genre is because he likes monsters!

Author: I can't even deny that. The other day I told a friend in front of a toy store, "Look, a Daimon (Note 2) is a basic life necessity," and they just backed away from me. Is my sense of style—wanting a Crystal Skull (Note 3) or a Mothman (Note 4) to make my room look fashionable—really that wrong?

Lina: I don't even know where to start, but you should probably do something about the fact that you have a V-formation of Dorotabo (Note 5) on top of your monitor. As a human being. Also, you've been dropping weird names for a while now; you're leaving the readers behind.

Author: Hmm. I suppose I should add some notes then.

> **Notes:** (Briefly explaining the vibe, as a full explanation would be too long. Note: These are all trading figures, not real monsters.)

- **Note 1: Inugami:** A weird dog-thing.
- **Note 2: Daimon:** A stylish dandy. Sucks blood.
- **Note 3: Crystal Skull:** A weird item. Exactly what it sounds like.
- **Note 4: Mothman:** An American cryptid. Pretty cute.
- **Note 5: Dorotabo:** I can't even say it. (Blushes)

Lina: ...Well... it's not fatally wrong, I guess. So basically, you're saying your desk is a harem?

Author: I'd rather you didn't call this situation a harem. To be clear, I do buy "normal" figures too, like the Choco-Zaurus.

Lina: The fact that your "normal" example isn't Choco-Egg says it all... Speaking of figures, aren't we in that "Dragon Heroine Selection" set?

Author: Yeah. I got the samples recently. I opened the box and saw the words "Naga Disguise x5" and felt blue for five minutes.

Lina: Disguise?

Author: Yes! Besides the color and clear versions of Lina and Naga, there's a "Special Option" set that gives Naga a cloak, a mask, and a jellyfish!

Lina: ...So that box only contains a cloak, a jellyfish, and a mask...?

Author: Looking at it, it's a cloak, shoulder guards, a sword, a jellyfish, a face, and a mask. It's like those weapon sets for old Gundam models.

Lina: Wow. I don't want that.

Author: Hey! You didn't have to be so blunt!

Lina: I mean, imagine a group of friends saying, "Hey, that Dragon Heroine set is out. It's got Mirelle, Ryoko, Matie, Frieu, Lina, Naga, and a secret figure!" and then someone buys one hoping for Frieu or Mirelle, opens it up, and gets... a cloak and a jellyfish. They'd die laughing. Actually, for me, that's totally okay!

Lina: Don't laugh. Have some sympathy. Anyway, I'm thinking of making them a reader giveaway.

Lina: "Since I have no choice" is a pretty rude way to put a giveaway. So, three lucky winners get the Naga option?

Author: That's not a service, it's a curse. I only have the Slayers ones, so I'll give a 5-piece set (Lina color/clear, Naga color/clear, Naga Option) to one lucky winner. Send a postcard to the Fantasia Bunko address... Deadline is end of January 2002.

Write "I want figures" clearly on the back!

Lina: Oh, that sounds like a normal giveaway. If you want them, use your leftover New Year's postcards to apply!

Author: We sincerely pray that no one goes bankrupt buying postcards and then realizes they could have just bought the figure they wanted at a hobby shop for the same price. See you later, everyone!

Lina: See you in the next afterword!